

THE INVESTIGATORS in

THE TRAIL OF THE FIREBUG





in

**THE TRAIL
OF THE
FIREBUG**

Jupiter Jones receives an anonymous phone call telling him to report a fire in Rocky Beach. At the scene of the fire, the firemen find the business card of The Three Investigators. This happens a second time, and the police puts the three detectives under suspicion of arson. Only the conviction of the perpetrator can exonerate them. But following the trail of the firebug is a dangerous undertaking. He is clever and leaves no traces. The Three Investigators must combine sharply and above all, keep a cool head.

The Three Investigators
in
The Trail of the Firebug

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(The Three ??? and the Red Avenger)

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1. An Anonymous Call

Something rattled outside in the salvage yard. Jupiter Jones did not feel comfortable. Was someone sneaking around there? Uncle Titus and Aunt Mathilda, with whom Jupiter had lived since his parents died, had gone to the cinema. He had stayed home alone.

Jupiter was in his bedroom on the second floor of the Jones family home. Reluctantly, he stood up and stepped to the window. From there, he could get a good view of The Jones Salvage Yard. The night was moonless and dark. Only at a few corners of yard did the yellow light of the street lamp fall over. Shadowy, an old mobile home trailer stood out from the street lights. It served Jupiter and his friends, Pete Crenshaw and Bob Andrews, as the headquarters for their detective agency. Directly next to the trailer was the open-air workshop, which, in the shadow of the trailer, was completely covered in darkness.

Strained, Jupiter stared out. There was something flickering in the open-air workshop. He startled. Was there a fire in the salvage yard? There was plenty of combustible material in the salvage yard—boards and mattresses, old furniture, boxes, and books.

Jupiter jumped down the stairs, rushed out of the house and scrambled into the salvage yard. Running across, he stumbled over a car tyre he hadn't seen in the dark, and reached the open-air workshop cursing. Jupiter grabbed the post where the fire extinguisher was hanging, but his hand reached into the void.

The fire extinguisher was gone. Almost at the same moment, Jupiter moaned. The flickering he had seen came from an electric fireplace that he had repaired in the afternoon with Uncle Titus. Apparently they had forgotten to turn it off.

Relieved, he ran back, but the fact that the fire extinguisher had disappeared worried Jupiter. But why would someone steal an outdated fire extinguisher, he wondered. It was probably long gone and Uncle Titus had simply not noticed it.

Jupiter went back into the house and locked the door as a precaution. The salvage yard was an ideal hiding place for every burglar. When they were younger, Jupiter, Pete and Bob had played hide-and-seek for whole afternoons and it was not uncommon for one of them to have to search for a long time until he finally found the others in one of the hidden corners.

Fortunately, there wasn't much to steal. Jupiter's uncle Titus didn't buy and sell expensive art treasures. He earned his income by trading in old equipment, books, furniture or household goods. Most people knew that. Every now and then, a valuable item would appear among all the rubbish.

Jupiter got back up to his bedroom and sat back down at his desk.

Suddenly he heard the phone ringing downstairs. He ran into the corridor and jumped down the stairs, always taking two steps at a time. That must be Pete, he thought. He was sure that he has a question about the maths test tomorrow. He grabbed the phone.

"Pete, is that you?" Jupiter panting into the mouthpiece.

A strangely distorted voice sounded: "Who is there?"

"Uh, I'm Jupiter Jones."

"Call the fire department, Jupiter Jones," the voice buzzed. It sounded cool and metallic. "There is a major fire at the harbour."

"Fire?" For a few seconds, Jupiter heard the caller just breathing.

“Joe’s Boat Rentals is on fire,” he croaked further. “Hurry up. Call the fire department.”

“But, mister, wait...”

Then the voice said a strange sentence. “Under the sign of fire, it has happened once... All luck explodes!”

“Whoa, mister, what is...”

But the caller had already hung up.

Was this a bad joke? Or was it bitter seriousness and danger looming? Confused, Jupiter wiped his forehead. He thought for a moment, then with a trembling hand, he dialled the number of the fire department.

“Rocky Beach Fire Department, This is Sheppard.”

At once Jupiter stuttered off. “Fire! There’s a fire at the harbour, please go there. Joe’s Boat Rentals. There’s a fire there.”

“I understand. Who are you and where are you calling from?”

“Excuse me?” Jupiter took a deep breath and had better control of himself now. “My name is Jupiter Jones,” he explained in a firm voice. “I’m calling from home.”

“And where would that be?” Mr Sheppard enquired.

Jupiter gave his home address.

“And you saw the fire? From there?”

“No, sir. Not myself. I was told over the phone just now.”

“Who called you?” Mr Sheppard asked.

“The man did not give his name, sir. But it sounded urgent.”

“All right, we’ll take care of it.” The fireman hung up.

Jupiter thought for a moment. By calling the fire department, he had done his duty. But the strange caller had made him curious. He picked up the phone again.

“Crenshaw?”

“Mr Crenshaw, Jupiter here. I’m sorry to bother you. Is Pete there?”

“Yeah, he’s been going through some maths homework all night. Hold on.”

Jupiter waited for a moment, then Pete was on the other end of the line.

“Hi Juve!” he started talking like a waterfall. “I’m glad you called, I was about to call you myself. I need your mathematical mastermind. I’m struggling with tomorrow’s test and I’d really like you to...”

“Not now, Pete.” Jupiter interrupted him and told his friend about the strange phone call. “I’ve just called the fire department,” he concluded. “They’re going to the harbour.”

“Well, what do you suggest?” Pete got right down to it. He had already forgotten about the maths test.

“We’re going there too, Pete. I’ll tell Bob. I want to know what’s going on at the harbour. It seems very strange to me.”

“Okay. Meet me at the big jetty,” Pete said. “I’ll be on my bike in five minutes!”

Jupiter agreed, ended the conversation and called Bob. But unfortunately his mother answered the phone. She decided that Bob was not allowed to leave. “He has a maths test tomorrow,” she explained. “I’m sorry. He’s still studying. And he’s got a lot to catch up!”

“But it will only be for a while,” Jupiter tried, but for that he got a rebuke.

“You had better leave him alone, Jupiter!”

“All right, Mrs Andrews. Give him my best.”

Jupiter hung up and wrote a short note to his uncle and aunt. Then he grabbed his jacket and keys.

“Let’s go,” he shouted to himself and ran out of the house.

A good ten minutes later, Jupiter got off his bike panting.

Pete, who had the best athletic ability among The Three Investigators, was already waiting for him. But his expression was contrite.

"If you thought that the sky would turn red from the fire, then you are mistaken," he explained. "Nothing to see, nothing at all. Probably a false alarm! Someone has fooled you, Jupe. We've come here for nothing."

Jupiter looked around. There was no sign of a big fire. "I already thought so," he replied. "One fire engine just went past me on the way here. But it's still a little way to Joe's Boat Rentals. We should definitely check everything here."

Pete nodded and they swung themselves onto their bikes to cover the remaining distance to the quay, at the end of which, illuminated by a street lamp, they saw the small wooden house of Joe's Boat Rentals completely unscathed. Only now did they notice that there was a fire engine parked right in front of the building.

Jupiter pulled the air through his nose. Was he wrong or was the cool air coming in from the sea filled with smoke?

"Well, yes," he murmured.

They pedalled on and shortly after, they reached Joe's Boat Rentals. Thin wisps of smoke passed the back of the building. Jupiter and Pete leaned their bikes against a bollard and walked towards the wooden house. Two firemen were extinguishing a waste container, in which a fire was apparently smouldering. The water hissed in the flames and steam rose. The two men were so busy that they did not notice the two boys.

"It's not exactly a big fire," Jupe said and wiped a wisp of smoke aside with his hand. "Joe was lucky then. I would have been very sorry now that he's finally started a business that's doing well."

Pete saw one of the firemen going behind the building because his fire extinguisher had run out. He probably went to get supplies. "It doesn't have to be arson," Pete thought. "Maybe it was carelessness, a burning cigarette or something. Someone saw it and reported it."

"Then why did he call me of all people?" Jupe wondered.

"I don't know. Maybe this person doesn't want a direct line to the police or fire department."

"And he just happened to look me up in the phone book?" Jupiter shook his head. "No, Pete. The way the conversation went, he wanted to talk to me. By the way, where is that other fireman?"

"Here." At that very moment, Jupiter felt a heavy hand on his shoulder. "So, who do we have here? Are you here to watch the fire?"

Startled, Jupiter and Pete turned around. A fireman of impressive stature stood behind them.

"Pete Crenshaw," Pete introduced himself to fireman and quickly stepped aside. "Yes, we noticed the smoke..."

Jupiter writhed under the fireman's hand. "Jupiter Jones," he said.

The man took notice. "Jupiter Jones? You're the one who called us?"

"Yes, sir."

"I'm afraid we'll have to talk about that later."

"But why, sir?" Jupiter asked.

"How did you know about this fire?"

"I got a call. I told you so!"

"Take it easy, boy!" The man held Jupiter by the arm.

“Hey!” cried Jupiter. “I’m not a criminal! I’m not leaving!”

At that moment, Pete saw the wind blowing a small paper blackened by the fire. With a skilful grip, he caught it from the air. Astonished, he took a look at it and then quickly let the paper disappear into his pocket. But the fireman seemed to have his eyes everywhere.

“What did you take? Give me that piece of paper,” he snarled at Pete. “But hurry, if you please.”

“Here, sir,” Pete said sheepishly.

The man let go of Jupiter and took the paper. With narrowed eyes he read the text that was written on it. It said:



“Very interesting, Jupiter Jones and Pete Crenshaw,” the fireman said and looked up. “I am afraid you have to come with me... On suspicion of arson!”

2. Accused!

“May I please call my parents?” Pete asked. “I’m sure they’re worried about me.”

Together with Jupiter, he sat in a glassed-in, cramped office of the Rocky Beach Police Department. It was quite empty, since only a few policemen were on night duty. In front of them was a dark-haired policeman who was in no way inferior to the fireman in height.

He was in his mid-thirties, had a sharply-cut face and introduced himself as Detective Franks. He looked at Pete coldly. “It’s not for nothing that your parents are worried. They should take better care of their brood!”

Without taking his eyes off Pete, the detective let himself fall into his chair. He coughed and then turned to Jupiter. “And you, do you want to use the phone?”

“I want to see Inspector Cotta right away,” Jupiter said. “The inspector is a friend of ours. He’ll explain that we had nothing to do with the fire at Joe’s Boat Rentals!”

“You’re out of luck. Inspector Cotta is on holiday,” said Detective Franks, grinning. “Even policemen have a day off! Where did you get that name, boy, from the papers?”

He took a sip from his coffee cup. He hadn’t offered Jupiter and Pete anything to drink. Franks threw a lump of sugar in the coffee and studied attentively the little bubbles that formed. Suddenly he looked up.

“You can forget bringing up Cotta’s name,” he said sharply. “I’m not falling for that. If you must know, I was stationed in Los Angeles before and I’ve dealt with all sorts of people, including those like you!”

“But I’m telling the truth,” Jupiter said desperately. “Is there no one else here who knows us? Have you ever heard of Chief Reynolds?”

“Old Reynolds? Tell me, have you been rummaging through the bottom drawers of the police archives?” he whispered back, “No, my boy. I don’t know you! But you two handsome lads are about to get to know me.”

He took a breath and pulled out the charred business card that Pete had found. “Now explain to me how your card got in the burning dumpster.”

“I don’t know,” Jupiter said, annoyed.

“Of course not! It’s always like that when I catch someone. Nobody saw anything, nobody heard anything, nobody did anything.” Franks threw the card on the table and bent over. “Roy!” he shouted.

A policeman looked in the office.

“Take one of them somewhere else,” Franks commanded. “I want to question them separately.”

“Who?”

Franks pointed at Pete. “Take him away first.”

The policeman nodded. “Please come with me, Mr Crenshaw.”

Reluctantly, the Second Investigator let himself be led out.

Franks stared at him for a moment. “Now for you, Jupiter Jones,” he said. He folded his hands and leaned on his desk. Trustfully he looked Jupiter in the eyes, his voice suddenly became velvety soft. “You seem to me to be the wiser of you two. Just tell me how it was.

You wanted to play a little prank, didn't you?" He poured himself a cup of coffee and took a sip. "I understand. I used to do a lot of funny things myself, when I was younger" he said.

When Jupiter fell silent, Franks changed the tone of his voice.

"You listen to me, wise guy. This ain't Los Angeles. Rocky Beach is a place of peace and order! And I intend to keep it that way! I'll see to that. My dear fellow, you sent out a whole fire engine... for a little fire-fighting show."

"But it wasn't me," Jupiter insisted on his position.

Franks drank from his cup. "Are you thirsty, boy?" he asked calmly. "A Coke?"

"Yes," said Jupiter, although he felt that Franks was playing with him. It was threats at first and now he came in the friendly way.

"Roy! Give the boy a Coke."

"I didn't light anything on fire," Jupiter said. "How can I call from home and set fire at the harbour at the same time?"

"A smouldering fire that has spread slowly," said Franks. "You've had time enough in between." He coughed. "Well, the fire in the dumpster didn't cause much damage, but a container like that costs a few hundred dollars. You want to pay for that? Or your parents?"

Franks took a break because the other cop brought the Coke. When Jupiter had filled the glass, Franks continued talking. "You're an intelligent guy," he began. "Listen to me. It often happens that an arsonist calls the fire department. He wants to see what happens. He wants to feel his power, in a sense. He gets other people to do things and react, and he watches everything, controls the game, feels smart, smarter than others, you know? He's the one pulling the strings. You know that feeling?"

"I understand very well. But I didn't start the fire," Jupiter insisted.

"You have no alibi for the time of the crime," Franks said quietly. "You were supposedly sitting at home alone. No witnesses. Unlike your friend Pete, who was with his parents. We already checked." He ran his hand across his desk and pushed some papers aside.

"Here." Suddenly he took the business card of The Three Investigators in his hand again. "Why do you think your friend tried to hide the business card?"

Jupiter wiped his sleeve across his forehead. He was sweating. "It wasn't us," he said defiantly. "I haven't the slightest idea how the card got there. We hand them out from time to time to possible clients of our detective agency. Maybe someone just carelessly threw it away."

"Carelessly discarded by Mr Unknown." Detective Franks smiled. "What a coincidence. I rather think," he said with a posed softness in his voice, "I rather think that you haven't had a case to solve in your, well, what you call it, 'detective agency' for a while. So you wanted to create a little tension yourself. It's usually so boring, isn't it?"

"Detective Franks, I'm never bored," explained Jupiter. "I always have something that interests me. What you say is an insinuation!"

"You are damn stubborn!" Detective Franks got up.

"Roy," he shouted outside. "Stay with our friend here. I'll check out the other one."

Midnight was already over when Jupiter and Pete were finally allowed to leave the Rocky Beach Police Department. The police had not been able to prove anything, but Detective Franks said goodbye to Jupiter with a clear warning: "Next time you won't get away scot-free! Now get out of here!"

Jupiter stopped. "Our bicycles, Detective Franks. They're still at the harbour."

Franks rolled his eyes. "That too! Roy!" he yelled. "Drive our guests down to the harbour, or they'll do something else on the way there." His colleague appeared with a grumpy face. Wordlessly, Franks turned off and went back to his office.

After the policeman had dropped them off at their bicycles, the two boys cycled home exhausted. The streets were empty and Pete let himself fall back a little until he rode next to Jupiter.

"He's really puffed up, this Franks," he ranted. "Who does that sheriff think he is?"

But Jupiter had gained the upper hand again for the time being. "Stay cool, Pete. I have to admit that Detective Franks's method of interrogation was unpleasant. From his point of view, he might even be right. From the way it all went down, he was just suspicious of us."

He was pedalling to keep up with Pete. "There's only one way," he pointed out. "We must find the real culprit."

"Oh, and how are we gonna do that? We've got nothing to go on except a phone call."

"I think the man will get back to me," Jupiter said. They reached the intersection where their paths separate and stopped.

"Why would he call you again?" Pete asked.

"The caller said something very odd, I didn't remember exactly what he said. I was too excited. It was something like: 'Under the sign of fire, it has happened once...'. This indicates that the caller will set fire a second time."

"Alright," Pete said. "I'd better get home now."

"Let's get some sleep," Jupe said. "Tomorrow you and Bob have a big maths test. And then all three of us will meet at Headquarters to discuss the situation."

3. The Suspicion

After school, The Three Investigators immediately cycled towards the salvage yard. Jupiter and Bob went to Headquarters first, while Pete stopped to have a chat with Uncle Titus.

They hadn't set foot on in the trailer for several days, as they had gone diving in one of Joe's boats after school in the good weather. Jupiter knew a girl from a previous case, Sandy Allen, who worked at Outdoor World—a store that sold equipment for outdoor activities like diving, camping and mountain climbing. She had won a diving course in a store window display competition and had invited The Three Investigators to join her. Of course, the boys had immediately accepted.

Jupiter climbed the steps to the trailer and unlocked the door. But before he pushed the door open, he bent down and picked up a small piece of straw. "Someone has been here," he said, startled.

"Why?" asked Bob, looking curiously over the First Investigator's shoulder.

"Our inspection system. I had it installed," Juve said. The inspection system consisted of a thin thread that Jupiter had attached to the door from the inside and led outside through a small hole above the entrance. There he had knotted it with a piece of straw lying across. When the door was opened, the thread tore and the straw sailed to the ground.

"Maybe it was Aunt Mathilda," Bob said.

Jupiter shook his head. "When I've locked the door, she won't go in. This is our kingdom and she'll stick to it." Carefully he opened the door, prepared for an unpleasant surprise.

But everything seemed unchanged inside Headquarters. Bob ran to the shelf and checked a few of the folders where they kept the documents for old cases. The thick layer of dust proved to him that nobody could have touched them in the last few weeks. Meanwhile, Jupiter already switched on the computer.

"Doesn't look like anyone's in here," he said while he was handling the mouse. "I don't get it."

Bob looked at him and thought. "Bugs, maybe?" he asked, and he bent down to look under the table.

They checked everything for bugs, including the telephone, but did not find anything. "Perhaps it was Aunt Mathilda after all," mumbled Jupiter. "She probably filled the crate."

Suddenly Pete's voice rang out from the door. "Are you looking for Easter eggs? Or are you playing hide-and-seek?"

"Juve thinks our headquarters had an unannounced visit," Bob explained as he put one of the chairs back on its legs. "But we found no traces and nothing is missing."

Pete took it easy. "Maybe it was you yourself, Juve! Aren't you a little tired after your little flaming battle last night?"

"Very funny." Jupiter yawned. "It was quite unpleasant to be mistaken by the police for a firebug. That Detective Franks can really torture anyone with his way of interrogation. I'm really dog-tired, I didn't get a wink of sleep last night. I should have left school earlier and came home to sleep..."

"Yes, that detective is a tough one," Pete said. "Did Uncle Titus say anything about the incident?" He closed the door and dropped himself into a chair.

Jupe nodded. "When my uncle came home, he was naturally surprised that I was gone. Then Detective Franks called and asked questions—whether they could testify that I was home all the time. Of course they couldn't as they were at the movies. But Uncle Titus and Aunt Mathilda believe me, of course." He leaned against the table.

"Bob, what do you think about this incident?" Jupe asked.

"From what you've told me, I suspect someone's been trying to frame you," Bob surmised.

"My thoughts exactly," Pete agreed.

But Bob would not be interrupted. "One—the caller announced a major fire. But when the fire engines arrived, only a small dumpster was on fire. Now, of course, the fire department will think that the mysterious caller just wanted to fool them... or else they will suspect Jupe, because this mysterious caller does not exist.

"Two—the caller has implicated Jupe in the arson. He expected Jupe to alert the fire department and then go to the harbour himself to check it out. This is suspicious behaviour in the eyes of the police and fire departments, especially if they do not believe the story with the caller."

Pete nodded thoughtfully. "That means something terrifying, though. The caller knew that Jupe was home alone and therefore had no alibi for the time of the crime."

"If he really has it in for Jupe, yes!" Bob added. "And to be on the safe side, the firebug left our business card at the scene of the fire."

Now Jupiter joined in the conversation. "That's an interesting point, anyway. How did he get our card?"

Bob had an answer for that too. "Well, we do give them to potential clients now and then. And lately we've been passing some out because we haven't had a new case." He nodded at Pete. "You told me about some people who approached you."

"Yes, that ice-cream vendor who had his waffles stolen... and the culprit turned out to be his dog," Pete threw in a laugh. "And the secretary of our school director who was missing her keys... which were eventually found in her car," Pete chuckled. "None of this was to be taken seriously. But okay. We should make a list of who we gave our cards to." He took a notepad off his desk. "I remember a total of three people, all of whom are actually suspicious."

After scribbling down the names, he handed the pad to Bob, who also put two names on the list. Jupiter was the last to add a name. He was already about to return the writing pad when he opened it again.

"I almost forgot," he said. "Three days ago, a man enquired at Joe's Boat Rentals about a scrap metal deal. It was just after our diving course. I interfered in the conversation and told the man about our salvage yard. He asked me the address. I wrote everything to him on the back of our business card as I had nothing else on me at the time. That may have been a bit careless," he admitted, "but everyone gets off on the wrong foot at some point." He thought for a moment. "Pete, did you flip the card when you found it last night?"

Pete nodded. "It was sooty. I don't know if it had anything written on it."

"Damn! There's gotta be some way we can get back to Detective Franks. Maybe my handwriting was on the card."

"You remember the man's name?" Bob asked.

"Unfortunately I did not ask him," replied Jupiter. "He was red-headed. His hair a little longer, up to above his ears, light curls. About the same age as Uncle Titus, and not quite as tall as me. He had a remarkably high voice and he asked about..." Jupiter faltered.

"Asked about what?" Pete asked.

“... Old fire equipment!” Jupe exclaimed.

“Gee, Jupe,” cried Bob. “That could be him!”

Jupiter nodded. “Could be.”

“Then you could have recognized him on the phone,” Bob said.

“I don’t think so,” replied Jupe. “The caller’s voice was distorted by a device. That was clear to me. It’s a...” Jupiter was looking for the right word.

“Decoder,” Bob helped. “In pop music, it’s often used. It’s used to make a voice very thin and distorted.”

“Yes, exactly,” Jupe said.

“But are you sure it was a man?” Bob asked.

“I think so.” Jupiter closed his eyes and tried to imagine the situation. “At least during the conversation, I had no doubt about it.”

Bob nodded and looked at the pad, which now had seven names and a question mark on it. “Is that all?” he asked.

Jupiter nodded. “At least for the last few weeks.”

“Then we’ll start checking all these people,” Bob said. “We don’t want to exclude anyone, but the red-head is at the top of the list.”

“Of course, it could also be different,” Jupiter suggested. “A very simple explanation for the appearance of our card would be that we lost it at the jetty. Last week, we went to Joe’s Boat Rentals almost every day for the diving course. We were changing there and the card could’ve slipped out of our clothes.”

“Sure,” Bob agreed. “Maybe even Joe himself swept the card with some garbage and put it in the dumpster.”

Jupiter shrugged his shoulders. “You see. Maybe it was just a stupid coincidence that the card appeared there.”

At that moment, they heard the shrill screeching of brakes. It came from the street, right on the other side of the fence. A slight impact followed.

“What was that?” cried Jupe, startled.

While Pete and Bob rushed out of the trailer to see what had happened, Jupiter looked through the ‘See-All’ periscope that allowed him to see the surrounding area from the trailer. They had seen this device used in submarines and immediately created one using stove pipes and mirrors.

After a few seconds, the First Investigator had brought the device into position. He saw an old woman lay on the street. Jupiter recognized her. He had seen her several times in the area recently, and she was very noticeable as she usually wore a crazy colourful patchwork coat. Apparently she had been hit by a car. But he saw no sign of a car.

4. Hit and Run

Jupiter left everything and ran outside. Pete and Bob were already with the woman who was still lying on the street. Her striking coat, sewn together from colourful rags, covered her body. All sorts of small woollen threads dangled down from it.

“Are you hurt? Can we help you?” Bob wanted to know.

“Thank you, thank you,” the woman moaned in a hoarse voice. “It’s all right, my boy.” She held her left arm and laboriously sat up. “Couldn’t that road hog be more careful?”

Bob and Pete reached under her arms and helped her up. “Are you hurt?”

“I don’t think so,” whispered the woman. “Thanks. You are dear boys.” Bob and Pete led the woman to the side of the road.

She moaned softly. “I have to sit down,” she said. “Just rest for a moment.”

Carefully the boys let her down on the side walk. Jupiter went onto the street and picked up her coat that had been left there. He put it around her shoulders.

“I’m not seriously hurt, just a bit of scratches on my arm,” the old lady explained. “I was not hit by the car, but nearly got run down by it. It surprised me, and I just fell on the street.”

The old lady then looked at the three of them with gratitude. “Very kind, young men. My name is Ferguson, Laura Ferguson. I’ve been living around here for a couple of weeks now. You’re from the salvage yard, aren’t you?”

Jupiter nodded. “Jupiter Jones, ma’am. I have seen you before. You live one street away in the red-painted three-storey house.”

“That’s right, my boy, you observe well.” She sighed and tried to get up. “It’s all right now.”

Bob helped her to her feet. “It’s not too bad,” she said, looking at her hand, all scraped up. “I think I’d rather go home now.”

“Nothing doing,” Jupiter explained and led her on. “You’ll come with us and get your wounds cleaned. Do you know who was driving the car?”

“Of course, young man! It was that person who’s been prowling around here for days. He just disappeared—as rude as he is.”

“Oh, you know him? And who is he?” Jupe asked.

“I do not know his name.” She made a disposable gesture. “Not so fast, young man, my leg still hurts a little.”

Jupe slowed the pace. Mrs Ferguson obviously didn’t want to talk any further and gathered all her strength to walk together with Jupiter. When they had passed the gate into the salvage yard, Jupiter decided to head for an old discarded park bench, which was framed by all kinds of junk.

Then he wanted to call Aunt Mathilda, who had an emergency kit for all kinds of problems and could certainly provide first aid. But Mathilda Jones had already followed the scene from the office window. The door opened and she stormed out with her first aid kit.

“My goodness, you poor thing, you’re really shaking.” She examined the woman and opened her case. Jupiter looked at a tangle of plasters, bandages and bottles.

Mrs Ferguson was coughing. “I guess it’s just the shock. Everything is fine, dear, thank you. You know, this has never happened to me before. I’ve never been in a car accident in

my life, but 20 years ago, I was in the hospital..." She faltered and turned her head because she had heard something.

"Jupe!" It was Uncle Titus who worked in the garage and hadn't heard about the accident. "Jupe! Have you seen my petrol can? I know for a fact it was here yesterday."

"Your petrol can? No," cried Jupiter. "And besides we have other problems! Could you help us?"

Uncle Titus dropped his tools and curiously came over to them. "What happened?"

Jupiter explained the incident to his uncle while Aunt Mathilda began to disinfect the wound with a spray. The old lady winced.

"It burns a little," said Aunt Mathilda, "but that will be okay soon. Now, just a little dabbing..." She put a bandage on it. "... And that is it."

"Thank you, my dear," Mrs Ferguson moaned. She got up.

"I wanted to tell you about the hospital. 20 years ago, I was in a hospital once. You know, I tell you..."

"Actually, we should call the police," Aunt Mathilda interrupted her. "It was clearly a hit-and-run."

"Never mind," said Mrs Ferguson. "I'm sure we'll run into that man again. I have seen him many times. He's been prowling around here quite a bit."

Jupiter pricked up his ears and took a step forward. "Then this would be a case for The Three Investigators," he explained in a confident voice. He ignored Aunt Mathilda's critical look. "May I show you our card?"

"Your card?"

"Yes, we are detectives," Bob explained and stood next to Jupiter. "Pete Crenshaw, you already know Jupiter Jones, and I'm Bob Andrews."

Mrs Ferguson was astonished to receive the card. "Real detectives," she murmured. "Ah, yes. So young. And what do the three question marks mean?"

"Well, that we investigate cases of all kinds," Jupiter hastened to say. "We solve mysteries, secrets, and the unknown."

"For example, drivers who hit older ladies and then disappear without a trace," Bob added. He didn't mention that there might have been more behind the incident. He thought about what Jupiter had told them earlier about the red-headed man who showed up at Joe's Boat Rentals.

The lady was impressed. "I thank you for the offer. You know, no one has helped me very much in my life. Everyone I know moved away or died. That's what happens when you get older..."

Aunt Mathilda interrupted them carefully. "Mrs Ferguson, in your case, we don't mind if the boys take care of the driver... do we, Titus?"

Titus Jones nodded. "Let them go ahead. It won't be a felon who kidnaps, abducts and imprisons them."

The old lady nodded. "All right, you detectives. You get the job. I hereby request the services of detectives." She paused for a moment, as if she had some reservations. "I don't have much money, though," she murmured.

Jupiter calmed her down immediately. "We take no fee, ma'am. We'll be happy if we can solve the case."

This information apparently satisfied Mrs Ferguson and she turned to Mathilda and Titus. "Thank you very much for your kind help," she said. "You are two polite people, Mr and Mrs Jones. And also a happy couple, I can see that."

Uncle Titus took Mathilda in his arms. "You are not mistaken. We have been happily married for many years."

Mrs Ferguson smiled at them. "How nice for you. I'm afraid I've been alone all my life. The man I cared for made off with another woman. That was when I was young. You know, when you get older, things don't get any easier."

"So it is," Jupiter interrupted, fearing that he could now be told the complete life story of Mrs Ferguson. He took the old lady by the arm. "Shall we escort you home, Mrs Ferguson?"

She looked at him. "Thank you, my boy. I can manage on my own."

"At least let me walk you to the gate..." Jupiter offered.

"Thank you." Mrs Ferguson smiled and turned to Aunt Mathilda. "When I'm feeling better, I'd like to come back and tell you a bit more—if you're not bored..."

"Of course not!" Aunt Mathilda nodded to confirm. "Let me know in advance. I'll bake a cherry pie."

"She is famous for her cherry pies," Jupiter hastened to say.

"Thank you, Mrs Jones."

Jupiter, Pete and Bob accompanied the old lady to the gate.

"So you haven't lived here long?" Jupiter asked.

Mrs Ferguson shook her head slowly. "Oh, no. I only moved to Rocky Beach a few weeks ago—because of age and weather. I'm still getting used to the place."

"One more thing, ma'am," said Jupiter, when he let go of the woman. "If you want us to look for the driver, a detailed account of the accident would be helpful."

"Yes, I'd love to."

"Did you see the licence plate of the vehicle?"

Mrs Ferguson shook her head. "The licence plate? No, my boy, everything happened too fast for me."

Jupiter pondered for a moment. Then he asked the lady: "Please tell me again exactly how it happened. Was the driver of the car headed straight for you?"

"I don't like to think about it that much anymore," she said. "All right, I guess it was like this... I wanted to cross the street. I'm not the fastest person on the street anymore, as you know."

Jupiter nodded and waited for Mrs Ferguson to continue.

"When I was in the middle of the road, I saw a car approaching. It drove slowly, and I thought the man would see me and brake. But he didn't."

"Did he accelerate?"

"You mean, did he go extra fast? No, I don't think so. That would be..." She didn't say anything else.

"Thank you," said Jupiter. "Mrs Ferguson, you were saying earlier that this man prowls about here occasionally? Do you know him?"

Mrs Ferguson laughed. "Oh, no, I don't think so. I have little to do with people like that. But he keeps wandering around here, haven't you noticed?"

Jupiter shook his head.

"You know... I have plenty of time." She moaned softly and looked down the street. "What am I going to do all day? Who am I useful to? I often sit at the window and look out. From my house, I can see many things. I ran into him once when I got back from shopping. This guy bumped into me because he wasn't watching where he was walking. My shopping bag fell down! That lout!" Mrs Ferguson was breathing hard. "He didn't even apologize!" she gasped in indignation.

"Can you describe him?" Jupiter asked.

“Of course I can. He’s not bad looking, mid-forties, red hair, not very tall.”

“Red hair?” Bob asked in a hurry.

“Yes.”

Jupiter was also suddenly very excited. “And the voice, can you say something about his voice?”

“He didn’t say anything.”

“I see,” Jupiter said in disappointment.

“The car?” Pete asked. “Did you recognize the type of car?”

Mrs Ferguson waved it away. “Sorry, I’ll have to pass. I don’t know about these new cars. All I can tell you is that it was blue. Yes, it was a medium-sized blue car.”

“Thanks,” Bob said.

“Very helpful,” Pete added ironically, catching an angry look from Jupiter in return.

Then they said goodbye. The Three Investigators looked at the old woman as she slowly walked along the street.

“Let’s go to Headquarters,” Jupiter suggested. “There’s much to discuss.”

5. School Reunion

The appearance of the red-haired man could not be a coincidence. The Three Investigators knew that. But what was it all about? They were sitting in their trailer, racking their brains.

After a while, Jupiter couldn't stand it any longer and got up. "My brain needs support," he explained. He went to the shelf and pulled out a chocolate bar. "So let's start over again." He shoved the sticky thing completely into his mouth. "I can guess how the accident happened."

Pete saw Jupiter's chewing movements with a frown. Did his friend want to go back to the times when he weighed almost twice as much? "How?" he asked mechanically and stared at him further.

"Somehow he's interested in the salvage yard. The red-head drives by and turns his head to look through the entrance gate. So he was not paying attention to the road, and just missed hitting Mrs Ferguson."

"One does not speak with a full mouth," Pete said and looked at the chocolate bar wrapper that Jupiter had crumpled onto the table. "So if I understand you correctly, you don't think he nearly hit her on purpose?"

"At least that's what Mrs Ferguson's statement sounded like. And we didn't hear a roaring engine, did we?"

Pete shook his head. "No. Well? Does it taste good?"

Jupiter grunted something.

"By the way, have you seen Mrs Ferguson's coat?" Bob threw in. "It's full of colourful pom-poms."

"She looks like a decorated Christmas tree," Pete laughed. "It's the fashion from 20 years ago."

Jupiter tore off the wrapper of a second chocolate bar. "Don't make fun of the old lady. Who knows what you'll look like when you're older."

"Fat and heavy... if we all eat as much as you do," Bob explained, somewhat offended. "Anyway, if you continue to raid our candy supply this frequently, you'll burst before you finish eating. I think we have to save you!" He went to the shelf, reached into the bottom and pushed a folder aside. Behind it was a bag of marshmallows, which he opened immediately.

"Hey Bob, I want to get fat too," Pete explained. Bob threw him a marshmallow, which Pete caught cleverly.

Jupiter was not impressed by all this. "Mrs Ferguson's information on the car and the driver is very sketchy. We're not going to get anywhere, and there are no witnesses... or have you noticed any?"

Pete and Bob shook their heads.

Jupiter reached into the bag of marshmallows and took out two pieces. "So plan one is... to ambush the red-head. Here's where Mrs Ferguson's description gets very interesting. The person could be the one I met at Joe's."

"Well, but there are many red-headed people around," Bob remarked.

"Plan two is... I'll hook up a tape recorder to the phone in the house, because I'm assuming that this Mr John Doe will call back. Then I'll have proof. After all, I don't want to

be constantly suspected of starting a fire. Future meetings with Detective Franks would be very unpleasant, because who knows..." Jupiter wiped his mouth, "who knows what he will say next!"

"Do you think that red-head has a hand in the fires?" Bob asked.

"I wouldn't put my hand in it just yet, but he's a smoking hot candidate," Juve said. "We must find out what he's up to next."

Jupiter reached into the marshmallows again. Bob watched it with growing discomfort. "Juve, if you keep this up, we're going to have to widen the door for you to go through!"

"Come on, I'm skinny enough. Besides, the bag is empty anyway."

After Bob and Pete left the salvage yard, Jupiter disappeared into the yard's storeroom and gathered all the materials he needed to tap his home's phone.

While he was tinkering with the telephone system in the living room, Aunt Mathilda entered. Before she could say anything, Jupiter said: "I'm just rigging the phone up to record conversations so that the police will believe me next time."

"Juve, you mean you expect the man to call again?" All of a sudden, Aunt Mathilda seemed worried.

Jupiter noticed and reassured her. "Just a precaution. And besides, you're usually at home."

"Well, generally yes," Aunt Mathilda said and fell silent. She did not walk away, but was looking at Juve for a while.

"Huh? Do you want to tell me something?" He looked up. "Or are you up to something again?"

Aunt Mathilda was twisting her wedding ring. "Well, you know how you always appreciate a place that's always free and clear." She took a deep breath. "I was going to ask you if your uncle and I could go away this weekend, just the two of us."

"You want to leave me alone to manage the salvage yard?" Jupiter looked at her and had trouble wiping that grin off his face. The discussion was usually the other way round—he wanted to go on a trip and Aunt Mathilda found a thousand arguments why it wasn't possible.

"Well, Juve, it's not the first time you've done that."

"But not for this long!" Jupiter grinned inside himself.

"It's only two nights," Aunt Mathilda said, "from Friday to Sunday. Titus and I have our school reunion, or more precisely, the reunion of all the classes of the same grade. A lot of people are coming together, and this time we're going to San Francisco. After Los Angeles, San Francisco is my absolute dream city! The reunion only takes place once every five years, and we didn't go to the last one because you were younger. But this time, it is not only about the business, as you have this problem with the caller. Well, if you are uncomfortable with it, then we won't go, Juve..." She looked at him sadly.

"Go on," said Jupiter. "I was only joking." He winked at her. "No problem. I'm okay with that. And besides, Bob and Pete can come here and help out... and it is highly doubtful that the caller will ever call back."

A glow went over Aunt Mathilda's face. She gave him a big kiss on the cheek. "Thank you."

"You're welcome." When Aunt Mathilda turned away, Jupiter wiped his cheek with his sleeve.

Then he bent over his equipment and kept on tinkering with it. Without looking up, he said: "School reunion... hmm... Uncle Titus and you. Actually, you never really told me

anything about yourselves. I don't even know much more about your life than that Mrs Ferguson who said earlier that you are so happy. How did you two meet, anyway? Was Uncle Titus your first boyfriend?"

"Jupe, I'm not asking you about your girlfriends either," Aunt Mathilda said with feigned amazement and raised her eyebrows.

Jupiter took the objection seriously. "But you are always curious anyway!"

"Okay, Titus and I went to the same school," Aunt Mathilda began to tell with a smile. "But in different classes. Well, those were the years when I didn't feel like going to school. It won't be any different today at that age."

"I can give you that in writing!" Jupiter confirmed and put the tape into the recorder.

"Oh yes, there were quite a few who were interested in me, nice guys, but Titus, I liked him best. By the way, he was already interested in all kinds of junk back then. He traded old records, books and costume jewellery in the school yard. That's how he financed the tickets for the rock concerts he invited me to, much to the annoyance of—what's his name—Dave, another student who always wanted to invite me too." She laughed. "But he was really unpleasant, and Titus had better taste anyway... Also in terms of music. Well, and then there were a couple of other attractive boys, Robby wasn't bad either, but Titus was my first choice. It was a great time—free, unattached, full of music, young and uninhibited..."

Before she finally started dreaming, Jupiter quickly added a question. "And the people from your school... where do they all live now?"

"All over the country, but most still in the Los Angeles area, some also in Rocky Beach. One of them is, for example..."

"Ow!" Jupiter yelled. "I've cut myself! Now I've dropped my screwdriver as well!"

Mathilda jumped in and took a look at the wound, but it was only a small cut.

"Not so bad," Jupe said and stuck his bleeding finger in his mouth and pulled it out again. "I never imagined what you were like when you were young," he said and looked critically at his thumb. "I have always seen you here. But when you start talking like that, I get really curious. Do you still have old photos?"

Aunt Mathilda nodded. The door opened and Uncle Titus entered the room. "I still can't find my petrol can," he murmured.

Radiantly, Aunt Mathilda turned to him and said cheerfully: "Titus, forget your petrol can. We may go to San Francisco. Jupe has given us permission."

6. Another Anonymous Call

Three days later, Aunt Mathilda and Uncle Titus packed their bags. Full of anticipation for the school reunion and full of expectation for the wonderful city of San Francisco, they were in the best of moods.

In the meantime, Jupiter had taken a liking to his uncle and aunt's outing. He wanted to enjoy the three days in his own way. Pete and Bob had received permission from their parents to stay overnight with Jupiter and help him with the work at the salvage yard. Jupiter absolutely wanted to keep the salvage yard open over the weekend.

The preparations for the next few days had increasingly pushed the thoughts of the mysterious arsonist out of everyone's mind. Their investigations had also revealed little. After checking the people on their list, they had eliminated all the women and considered that the idea that the ice-cream vendor had made the call was simply absurd. For the remaining people, the detectives had even succeeded in establishing an alibi during the questionable time. All that remained was the red-haired man.

"Let me try, Aunt Mathilda!" Jupiter took the heavy bag from his aunt, with which she tormented herself down the stairs, and carried it to the car.

Uncle Titus had opened the bonnet and was just about to adjust something on the engine. "Now, of all times, the car is about to break down," he cursed. "Yesterday I just checked and cleaned it."

Mathilda came to him and looked over his shoulder. "We should finally get a new car," she said, shaking her head.

Jupiter almost had a fit of laughter. "You've been saying that for decades. If the car won't start, I'll offer you my bike!"

"Thank you very much." Titus wiped his hands. "But that won't be necessary now. Titus Jones knows about engines." He got behind the wheel and turned the ignition key. The car started. "You see? Get in, Mathilda."

"Wait a minute." Although time was slowly running out, Jupiter's aunt rushed back into the apartment at least five times because she had forgotten something.

Shaking his head, Jupiter pushed her travel bag into the boot and slammed it shut. That was when Aunt Mathilda came back again. She waved a spectacle case and gave the signal to leave.

While Titus Jones waited behind the wheel, she quickly showered Jupiter with all kinds of advice. With half an ear, he listened and promised to pay attention to everything. Finally, his aunt got into the car.

"I left the hotel number in case you need anything. It's on the bulletin board by the phone."

"All right, Aunt." Jupiter smiled. "I don't think I need to call you for the next three days."

Uncle Titus, who stuck his head out of the car window, then said: "For three days, you're the boss of my salvage yard. Good luck, Jupel!" Then he stepped on the accelerator and the car moved off.

A few minutes after Titus and Mathilda left, Mrs Ferguson came by.

"Hello, young man," she called out to Jupiter. "I just want to thank your aunt for the medical help."

"I'm sorry. My uncle and aunt have just gone away for a few days," Jupiter said. "Are you feeling better?"

Happily she raised her hand, on which a small plaster was still stuck. "Much better," she explained. "It was only a graze. Have you found any sign of that thoughtless driver yet?"

"Nothing," said Jupiter. "He probably doesn't dare come here anymore."

Mrs Ferguson nodded. "I can imagine. A rude person. I haven't seen him since, although I stand at the window diligently and look out. There's not much going on in my life," she grunted, took a break and giggled to herself. "Sometimes I think, because..."

"What was that red-head doing in around the salvage yard anyway?" Jupiter interrupted her. "You said he was hanging around."

"Oh yes, he parked nearby and walked up and down here, looking at everything, as if he was appraising the property, or as if he was looking for something. Of course, I don't know exactly."

"You don't mind keeping an eye on our yard, Mrs Ferguson? I mean, pay attention to this man, but also keeping an eye on the place in general."

"Gladly, young man, of course. But why? Has something happened?"

"No, no," Jupiter hurried to say. "Sometimes strange people prowl around here and I would be very grateful for a quick information. I'll give you our phone number." Jupiter wrote down the number on a piece of paper he had in his pocket and handed her the note. "But be careful, Mrs Ferguson. You don't want to be in danger again."

"I'll be careful," said Mrs Ferguson, "I'm afraid things are different nowadays than they used to be."

She said goodbye and Jupiter looked at her for a while, lost in thought. It was certainly not easy for the woman to settle in a new area. She wanted to make herself useful and tried to connect, and Aunt Mathilda was obviously sympathetic to her.

Towards evening, Pete and Bob appeared and threw their sleeping bags into Jupiter's room. They were in good spirits and were looking forward to the weekend together.

"Let's see what we can fill our hungry stomachs with," Jupiter suggested.

As they were about to inspect the pantry, the phone rang. It was Mrs Ferguson who wanted to speak to Jupiter. She said she saw the car with the red-head at the wheel. Now he had disappeared again. Jupiter thanked her. He took note of the message calmly, and he immediately examined his wire-tap construction on the phone.

Bob and Pete went out for a short stroll in front of the gate. After a few minutes, they returned without anything new or suspicious.

"Nothing," Pete said. "At least he's not parking in the neighbouring streets. Maybe he was just checking if you were alone, Jupe."

The boys went into the kitchen to get ready for the dinner that Aunt Mathilda had prepared for them. But due to the surprising news about the appearance of the car, the mood was tense. It was as if there was a threat in the air. Was the man's appearance a coincidence or did he become active again?

Jupiter felt the restlessness and he knew where it came from—their opponent was in control and they had to wait for his next move. "We should take a look outside once in a while," he suggested. "It's already getting dark and I don't want to be unpleasantly surprised."

Pete and Bob saw it the same way, and each of them took turns standing at the window to check the situation.

Just as Jupiter was taking the vegetable soup out of the microwave, the phone rang. The three boys stared at the phone as if electrified. Jupiter put the soup on the table and ran to it. First he switched on the tape recorder, then he picked up the receiver. "Jupiter Jones."

"Hello Jupe!" It sounded loud from the receiver. "Aunt Mathilda here. Are you okay? Did you find everything?"

Jupiter's expression relaxed and he nodded at Pete and Bob. "Of course, Aunt Mathilda. You have prepared everything perfectly—as always. We are especially looking forward to dessert."

"The vanilla ice cream with raspberries? But don't forget the soup!"

"No way. We'll spoon everything down to the last pea."

"Has the strange caller called, Jupe? If anything happens, we'll come right back, you know that. And don't get involved in anything!"

"No, don't worry," said Jupiter in the calmest possible voice. "Did you arrive safely?"

"Oh, yes, everything is wonderful here. I just forgot my lipstick." It went back and forth for a little while, then Jupiter hung up, turned off the recorder and sat down at the table with his friends.

Bob reached behind him and turned on the radio. "A little music is good. I've got a stupid feeling something's gonna happen today."

"Nonsense." Pete said. "I'm pretty cool."

"Pretty cool, huh? At least for once..." Bob said cheekily.

The mood relaxed a little and the topics changed to music and sports... until the phone rang again. Jupiter jumped up and told Bob to turn off the radio. Again, he pressed the recorder. Then he picked up the phone. "Jupiter Jones."

For a moment, there was silence. Then someone shouted, "Jupe? Is that you? Mel here. Can you and I go to the movies tomorrow night? I've already asked Joe. He has other plans, Paul too, and Betty doesn't want to go."

"And now it's my turn, Mel. I'm sorry, I can't. We're in the middle of dinner. I don't have time to talk long. I'm sorry, Mel."

"Pity. I'll call Roderick now."

"Do that." Jupiter rolled his eyes and hung up. Mel was a schoolmate who always called at the worst possible moment. Somehow nobody liked him and sometimes Jupiter felt sorry for him.

Jupiter sat down at the table again. Bob had meanwhile taken the dessert out of the fridge and distributed it on the plates. Now he turned on the radio again. The hit parade was on and they listened to it from position 24 to 11.

They were doing the dishes when the phone rang again.

"It's probably my mother this time," Pete said and rubbed a bowl dry. "Just checking to see if we're still alive."

Bob looked at him and muttered gloomily, "I think it's him."

"We shall see." Jupiter was very relaxed. He wanted to turn on the recorder, but was horrified to see that it was already on. "Damn, I forgot to turn it off after Mel called! I hope the tape is enough." He answered the call. "Jupiter Jones."

At the other end, there was a whooshing sound. Jupiter looked at his friends in alarm. Then a buzzing voice sounded. "Call the fire department, Jupiter Jones." The voice spoke slowly and stretched as if it were a computer. "It's a big fire. At Booksmith. Hurry! Call the fire department! Under the sign of fire, it has happened twice... All luck explodes!"

“Hold on, mister!”

“Until our next encounter, Jupiter Jones...”

“Wait a minute...” Jupiter cried, but the caller had already hung up.

Trembling, Jupiter turned around. “What now?” he asked.

“We’ll go there, of course!” cried Pete.

Jupiter nodded mechanically. “They will suspect me again.”

“You’d better call the fire department first,” Bob interjected.

“Imagine it’s the book store now!” Jupiter nodded and dialed the number. At the other end someone picked up the phone. Jupiter swallowed, and then said: “My name is Jupiter Jones. I wish to report a fire. At Booksmith. Please go there immediately.”

“Where are you calling from?”

“Here, from The Jones Salvage Yard. I was warned over the phone.”

“Jupiter Jones? Haven’t we spoken before?”

“Yes, sir. Again, I’ve got a call about a fire!” Jupiter said. “This time I have the proof of the phone call on tape!”

“I hope, Mr Jones, that you’re not playing a trick on us again.” With that, the call ended.

“What a jerk!” Jupiter snorted and pulled the tape out of the recorder. “Alright, let’s go. Let’s go there!”

7. Facts! Facts! Facts!

The Booksmith book store was an old-established small business. They were probably the oldest book store in Rocky Beach. It was on Santa Monica Street. Since Mr Smith had taken over the shop from his uncle, it had been on the upswing.

Bob had been a regular customer there for some time—both for reading and for research—especially when they have an antiquarian section for books that had long since gone off the market.

He also enjoyed chatting with Lesley, who had been working at Booksmith for several months. She was hardly older than Bob and always had a special reading tip for him. She had once given Bob a friendship bracelet, and Jupiter and Pete always teased him about it. In fact, Bob was very happy with the bracelet. ‘Read me’ was written on it, and he had been wondering for a long time if Lesley was trying to tell him something.

When The Three Investigators rode their bikes into Santa Monica Street, the fire-fighting operations were already under way. A hose had just been rolled through the gate entrance. In brief, a fireman gave the orders. Apparently it was not only just a waste basket burning.

The boys locked their bicycles to a lamp post in front of a neighbouring store and pushed their way through the crowd of onlookers, which grew rapidly.

A fireman stopped them at the gate entrance. “This is as far as we go, boys!”

They stopped and saw that it was not the book store itself that was burning, but a small building in the courtyard. It was the storeroom where mainly brochures and old books were stored.

A girl with curly brown hair tied into a ponytail was standing in the passageway. She had heard the fireman’s words and turned around.

“Lesley,” cried Bob in relief. “Are you alright?”

“Hi, Bob.” As she came closer, Bob saw that she was close to tears.

“The storeroom is on fire,” she said. “All the books are in danger!”

“I think the fire department has the situation under control,” Bob tried to calm her down. “They seem to have arrived in time.” He pointed to his friends. “Jupiter and Pete, I told you about them.” Bob led Lesley through the crowd. Jupiter and Pete followed. Then the four of them were finally alone.

“Tell us exactly what happened,” Jupiter asked Lesley.

“If I only knew!” she blurted out. “I stayed at the shop a bit longer today because Mr Smith, my boss, has gone away for a few days. I had just finished checking the till and when I went into the courtyard, I saw there was a fire! But before I could run back inside to call the fire department, they were already there!”

“We called them,” said Jupiter.

“You?”

“Yes, we were told by a caller.”

“Who was the caller?” Lesley asked.

“I’ll tell you later,” Bob said. “Did you notice anything suspicious? For example, a person, someone tampering in the yard, perhaps a customer?”

She was thinking. “Nothing out of the ordinary. There were a few regulars, but nothing much else. Let’s see... what did I sell today? Irving’s new novel, a non-fiction book on advertising.” She said. “But yesterday, there was a man here looking for old fire-fighting books!”

“Old fire-fighting books?” Jupiter listened with interest.

“What did this man look like?”

“Well, red hair, not very tall and a narrow face.”

“That’s him!” Pete interrupted her. “Did he give his name?”

“No.”

“The red-head leaves his mark,” Jupe said thoughtfully. His right hand moved to his lower lip. “What did he buy?”

Lesley shook his head. “Nothing. I saw him looking at a book on old fire engines. Then he left.”

“Pity.” Jupiter left his lower lip alone again. “Otherwise, he might have left his bank or credit card and we’d finally have something in hand. But the trail gets hotter from here.”

At that moment, the conversation was interrupted by a strong voice. “Aha, my friends! All three here today?”

They turned around. Detective Franks stood behind them and bared his teeth. “And you are the witness, Lesley Dimple from Booksmith?” he asked the girl.

Lesley nodded.

“My colleague Roy Koschinsky will take care of you. I’m afraid I’m gonna have to take the boys away now.” He pushed Jupiter into the side. “Come on, let’s go! The whole gang!”

Franks showed The Three Investigators the way to his police car. “So you’re Bob Andrews—the third in the league of these detectives?”

Bob nodded. A jolt sent him to the back seat of the car. Pete and Jupiter went in after him. Franks closed the door and went into the driver’s seat. With a scowl on his face, he turned around. “It’s getting tight for you! ... Another call from Jupiter Jones... another fire! And again a card of The Three Investigators was found near the fire!”

Jupiter turned pale.

“Can you explain this?” Franks asked. He pulled a business card from his jacket pocket. “It’s one of yours, isn’t it?” he asked hypocritically.

“Sir, we’re being set up,” Jupiter began. “Systematically set up. You can’t believe...”

“Believe?” the detective interrupted him. “Facts, facts, facts! I see what I’m holding.”

“Wait!” Suddenly Jupiter rummaged through his pocket.

“There.” He pulled out the cassette tape. “Listen for yourself! This is the caller I told you about.”

Franks picked up the cassette and put it in his car player. It immediately jumped out again because the tape had run out.

“You have to rewind it,” remarked Jupiter. “The conversation should be at the very end. I hope it’s all there.”

“I hope so, too, for your sake,” said Franks. He rewound the cassette and pressed play.

There was a whooshing sound. Franks turned the volume knob. They waited.

Jupiter got nervous. Why didn’t the conversation come on? Well, he had forgotten to turn off the recorder after Mel’s call, but actually the tape should have been enough. How much time had elapsed between the last two calls?

Still hissing. Franks lit a cigarette and looked out of the window as if the whole thing was none of his business.

Meanwhile, over at Booksmith, the crowd of onlookers gradually dispersed. The extinguishing work was finished. Now there was nothing much to see.

A fireman came over and waved Franks out of the car. The detective nodded at him, stopped the tape and got out of the car.

The fireman pulled Franks aside with their backs to The Three Investigators. Apparently, the man showed Franks something. Then he disappeared again and the detective came back to the car. With his left hand, he held his jacket under which he had hidden something. He sat down and turned on the tape again. The hissing sound was still there.

“The fire was set with materials such as those found in a used goods warehouse,” the detective said. With one move he pulled out the object he had hidden under his jacket. Although the evidence was packed in a thin plastic bag, Jupiter recognized it immediately.

“An old petrol can,” Franks said. “This will tell you something.” He waited a moment to savour the surprise. “Look here! Here it is—written big and clear!”

On the petrol can was a label that said: ‘The Jones Salvage Yard’. That was too much! It was Uncle Titus’s petrol can, and the firebug must have stolen it. Jupiter wanted to rebel, but he forced himself to rest. But the cassette would soon give more information.

There was a crack. Finally, the call’s recording came at the moment where Jupiter picked up the phone.

“Jupiter Jones...” it came from the tape. “Call...” Then suddenly it was silent. The tape was cut off.

“Listen, Detective...” Jupiter began to say.

“Your recording was not very perfect!” The detective laughed. “Not like this, my friends! Not with me!”

8. Trapped!

They took turns sitting in Franks's office. It turned out to be a long night again. The policeman interrogated The Three Investigators even more intensively than before. They were questioned separately. Again and again, Franks presented the petrol can that the fire department had found in the courtyard of Booksmith. The firemen were sure that the contents of the petrol can were used to start the fire.

Now it was Jupiter's turn. Next to Franks's coffee pot, the evidence was on the table right in front of him. The can was wrapped in plastic.

"Mr Franks, I suppose you are going to examine the petrol can for our fingerprints," Jupiter suspected.

"Exactly."

"And you will find mine on it, sir."

The detective was surprised by the openness of the answer. "I wouldn't be surprised."

"As it says on the petrol can, it comes from The Jones Salvage Yard. I also recognize it by the dent in the cap. It belongs to my uncle, Titus Jones, and I've held it in my hand before."

"Now we're finally getting somewhere." Franks sat back relaxed. "So tell me the whole story."

"There's nothing else to tell. A few days ago, my uncle couldn't find this can. It was stolen. That's all I know!"

Franks jumped up furiously. "What is this stuff you're putting me on?"

"But you must believe me, Mr Franks! Someone is trying to set us up!" Jupiter took a breath. "If we, The Three Investigators, were behind the arson attacks, we would hardly be leaving such clear evidence. It would be the safest way to put ourselves in prison."

"In fact, you already have one foot in it."

"Especially not with the second arson attack," Jupiter added. "Sir, believe me, somebody is trying to wipe us out... or distract us from themselves."

The detective frowned and took a big sip of coffee.

"Detective Franks, I'd admit that I made a mess of recording the phone conversation with the arsonist, so I'm offering you to put a tap on our phone," Jupiter added. "The caller will get back to me. He said something like 'it has happened twice'. That suggests that he'll strike again at least for a third time. And we'll set him up!"

Franks was thinking. Jupiter's arguments seemed to impress him. "Alternatively, I could lock you up, and if the fires continue, then I'm sure you're out of the game."

"But we are innocent!" Jupiter pleaded. "Let us go! Then the perpetrator will feel safe and when he attempts the third fire, you can set a trap for him."

"Okay." Franks agreed. "Let's do it this way. Starting tomorrow morning, we'll tap into your home phone. But it's not necessarily proof of your innocence. A friend of yours can also make these calls. Surely you could see that as a possibility."

"In theory. But why don't you trace the caller," suggested Jupiter. "Then you know where he's calling from."

"Given the brevity of the conversation? You must stall him then, Jupiter!"

"I'll try."

The detective called Pete and Bob and explained to them that they were temporarily free to go. "And one more thing... You are not to leave town until further notice. You're not out of this mess yet! And I need full cooperation, and no secrets. Is that clear?"

"Sure," replied Jupiter. "Sir, we will give you the real culprit."

"You sure got a mouthful, kid! Let us worry about that, please."

Jupiter nodded. "Will you be watching us, Detective?"

"I'll think about it. At least you don't go one step out of Rocky Beach!"

Bob looked sad. "Tomorrow my cousin from Seattle will arrive. I wanted to show her San Diego..."

"Cancel the trip," Franks explained succinctly. "Be glad that I don't lock you up right away! It would be easy for me, given the evidence. Now get out of here!"

Jupiter said shyly but clearly: "How are we supposed to get our bikes? They're still at Booksmith."

Franks hit the table. "My goodness, doesn't anyone ever give me any peace?" He got up and went out into the hall.

"Roy!" he yelled. "Take the boys to their bikes!"

Outside the Booksmith store window, Roy stopped the police car. It was late and there were nobody out on the street at all. The Three Investigators got out of the car and thanked the policeman for the ride. Tired, they dragged themselves to their bicycles, which were still locked to a lamp post.

Bob pulled his key out of his pocket and bent over the lock. "With Franks's interrogation methods, eventually you would believe yourself to be guilty," he said, pushing his bike aside.

Now Pete took his bike. "He's not very gentle."

"But he slowly seems to believe us," explained Juve. "At least he no longer excludes the possibility that we are telling the truth."

"Hopefully," Pete murmured. "The best thing would be to find the culprit ourselves."

Without communicating, they had walked in front of Booksmith's window during the brief conversation. "Shall we take another look at the courtyard?" Jupiter asked.

Pete and Bob nodded. "Sure." They put their bikes in the dark doorway. Other than a slight smoky odour in the air, there was nothing to indicate the incident of a few hours ago. The courtyard was dark.

With sudden discomfort, Bob looked around. "Juve, wasn't there just a ray of light over there?" he asked uncertainly.

"I didn't see anything." Jupiter pulled out his flashlight and turned it on. "Come, fellas."

Quietly they crept towards the storeroom. After a few metres, they came across a yellow police tape that was used to prevent access to the building.

"Wait, Juve," Pete said. "We are not allowed any further—police seal."

But Jupiter lifted the yellow tape. "Pete, we are not going to touch or change anything. We just want to look around very carefully." He waved his flashlight. "Come on, fellas."

The two boys bent down and slipped through.

"Ow!" Pete yelled.

"What is it now, Pete?" Jupiter shone over to him.

"I stumbled across this pile of charred pamphlets," he whispered. "Must have been thrown out from the storeroom by the firemen. There are all kinds of junk lying around."

"No wonder... a fire like this destroys a lot of things." Juve remarked.

They reached the door. It had become somewhat deformed by the fire and was only leaning against the wall. Jupiter carefully pushed it open.

"Let's go in," he whispered. "But for goodness' sake be quiet... or a neighbour will call the police! And I don't want another encounter with Franks." He disappeared inside.

"That would be embarrassing," Pete agreed. "If he catches us here, we won't be free for a few years. Come on, Bob, keep moving. I don't want to be seen in the courtyard."

Bob, however, turned around. "Wouldn't you rather stay outside and watch?" he asked.

"Me alone out here? No, Bob, I'm coming in with you." Pete was the last one to slip into the building. "It's all burned up here," he said, pulling the air through his nose, "and it smells terrible."

They were now in the front part of the building where mainly brochures and pamphlets were stored. The fire-fighting operations had completely softened many stacks of paper.

"Shh!" Jupiter put a finger to his lips. "Do you hear that?"

They were silent and listened.

"The sound had come from there... behind the door there," Bob whispered and pointed to a small door by the side. "That's where the old books are stored."

Was there another nocturnal guest? But now everything was quiet. Jupiter switched off the flashlight. Slowly, The Three Investigators groped their way forward towards the door.

Carefully Jupiter pushed the handle down. The door was not locked. "Does the storeroom have another exit?" he asked Bob.

"No," Bob whispered back.

"Then we have him," Jupe whispered. "Come on, let's set up inside by the door. There are three of us. Come on in."

"There's also a light switch in there by the door frame," Bob said.

"Good, Bob. On the count of three, you reach in and turn on the lights." Jupe instructed. "We must take advantage of the surprise. Ready, Pete? Okay, Bob. One, two, three!"

Bob plucked up his courage, opened the door and reached in to the light switch and pressed it. But it remained dark. "Bummer. The light circuit must have been destroyed by fire."

Nevertheless, the three of them entered. At that moment, they heard a scratching noise further at the end of the storeroom. A light breeze came towards them.

"The window!" cried Bob. "I forgot all about that! He's getting away!"

Jupiter switched on the flashlight and they stumbled forward, past shelves and boxes to the other end of the room.

"Damn!" Pete's jacket was caught on a revolving column. It toppled over and a flood of paperbacks fell upon him. The other two helped him up.

"And now what?" Pete asked.

They shone around. Nothing moved. "He's gone!" Jupe remarked.

"No! There," Bob suddenly shouted. "He's at the door! He set us up!"

They saw a black shadow that escaped through the crack of the door. The door closed. Then they heard a key turn in the lock. They were trapped!

Pale with fright, Pete sat up. "If it..." he began and then he faltered.

"If what?" Jupiter pressed him.

"If it was the firebug, and he starts a fire again, then we..." He did not dare to say the rest of his thought.

For a moment, there was silence.

"The window! We can get out through the window!" Bob suddenly shouted.

Jupiter shone a light at the window. "This is much too small," he said. "We won't fit through it. Even the firebug couldn't have got through there unless he is a kid."

"Let's look for another way out," Bob said.

Jupiter nudged Pete. "There's another way," he said. "Pete, get out your lock picks and open the door! Hurry up!"

"Yeah, sure!" Pete fumbled around in his jacket until he finally found his lock picks.

"Go, Pete, that way." As best he could, Jupiter shone a light in his path.

Hurriedly, Pete went to the door and started poking around the lock with a lock pick. "He left the key in from the other side," he gasped. "That's just bad luck!"

"Then turn it down and push it out," Jupiter suggested while he continued to shine his flashlight at him.

"Yes." Pete tried to calm down. "Panic is useless! Wait... There! ... I've got it! Yes!"

They heard the key on the other side fall to the ground with a soft clang.

"And now the lock! Pete, hurry!" Juve urged.

Suddenly a strong beam of light flashed up behind them. Startled, the boys turned around. A bright light shone through the window towards them. Dazzled, they closed their eyes.

9. The Key

Surprised, Jupiter dropped the flashlight. Bob just stood there while Pete hid behind a box of books.

“Bummer,” Pete muttered. “We’re trapped!”

“Quiet, Pete,” Jupiter said and then he shouted out loud, “Who’s there?”

They heard a high, nervous laugh. “Bob? Jupiter? Oh, it’s you,” whispered a woman’s voice. “And I thought I’d outwitted the firebug!”

“Lesley,” Bob exclaimed. “I’m glad it’s you.”

The light disappeared from the window frame. “Wait, I’ll let you out!”

They heard Lesley jump off something and then run around the courtyard. A few seconds later, she unlocked the door and entered the storeroom. Now it was not long before The Three Investigators groped their way out of the storeroom.

“I wanted to look for traces again,” Lesley explained, as the boys had gathered around her. “Just as you probably wanted to. Then I heard noises and thought the firebug was coming back.”

“And then you set a trap for him. Not bad,” praised Jupiter. So slowly he recovered.

Lesley took note of the compliment of the First Investigator with a smile. “Look what I found!”

The Three Investigators bent over to see what Lesley was holding in her hand.

“A key,” Pete said and accepted it. “Looks like one for a door. Certainly not from this door. Maybe it’s for an apartment or a safe.” He then passed the key to Jupiter.

“Where did you get it, Lesley?” Jupiter asked.

“It was slipped into the gap under the door to the courtyard. It’s not mine, and neither is Mr Smith, my boss. I’m definitely sure of that.”

“How can you be sure?” Jupiter asked.

“Because I lost a nickel this afternoon. It rolled into the same gap. And the key wasn’t there yet. Mr Smith was already gone by then.”

“Then it must have come from the firebug,” Jupiter remarked, but immediately followed up by saying: “Perhaps it was also from one of the firemen. But I can well imagine that the firebug lost it when he bent down to set the fire.”

Suddenly Jupe got all excited. “Do you know what this means?” As he so often does, he gave himself the answer right away: “The firebug will return to search for the key.”

“Then we should watch out for him,” Lesley suggested.

“Why ‘we’?” Jupiter wanted to know.

She gave him a slightly offended look. “I found the key, so I’m in.”

Jupiter frowned. “Alright.” He gave in. “At least you can let us into the book store, then. You sit by the back window. You should be safe there.”

Lesley nodded. “All right, what about you? Aren’t you coming?”

Jupiter shook his head. “I suggest that Pete and Bob stay with you. I will go back to the salvage yard. I want to check if everything is still okay there. After all, I am currently put in charge of the yard, and I’m not entirely comfortable with the idea that the perpetrator will

help himself there like in a service centre for firebugs. A few days ago, I had the impression that someone was there.”

Pete nodded. “You also said that someone had broken into our headquarters,” he reminded Jupiter.

“Of course!” Jupiter struck his hand against his forehead.

“Now I also know what that someone might have been looking for there—our business cards! I’ll check immediately if any are missing!”

It was done as Jupiter had decided. Pete and Bob stayed with Lesley. If the three observed anything suspicious, they were to call Jupiter—and the police.

On the other hand, Jupiter promised to report immediately after he had checked on things at Headquarters and at the salvage yard. If he failed to call, it meant that something had happened to him.

The First Investigator cycled home on the double. When he turned off the main road, he passed the apartment building where Mrs Ferguson lived. It was a somewhat run-down old building where tenants changed frequently.

Jupiter got off his bike and checked names of the tenants at the intercom panel. “Ah, on the third floor,” he murmured. “From there she should have a good view of the grounds.” He took a step back from the building and looked up. It was all dark. He decided that tomorrow, he’ll ask her if she has seen anything else.

A short time later, when Jupiter turned into the street where the salvage yard was located, he felt a tingling in his stomach. He felt that the firebug had succeeded in unsettling him.

When he was back at the salvage yard, usually all the tension would be released from him. Here he was on his own turf, protected from the outside world. Today was different.

He parked his bike outside the salvage yard and instead of the main gates, he used a secret entrance along the wooden fence of the yard. Known as Red Gate Rover, The Three Investigators had set it up many years ago so that they could enter the salvage yard unseen if necessary. On the outside of the fence was painted the great fire of San Francisco in 1906—an allusion to current developments. He activated the secret mechanism, some boards swung up, and he slipped into the salvage yard.

For quite a while, he looked around. Only when he didn’t notice anything, did he go into Headquarters. There Jupiter immediately ran to the desk and pulled open the drawer which contained a small box. He opened the box and poured out their business cards onto the table.

“I think there are some missing,” he murmured. “We had at least thirty left.”

Then the First Investigator counted the cards. “Twenty-two,” he said aloud. “So the firebug took some.”

Jupiter put back everything and walked carefully across the yard again to check. Everything seemed to be quiet. Actually, he had planned to search the entire area thoroughly. But now that he was alone, he didn’t want to know exactly what was possibly hiding there in the dark. He really wasn’t a frightened boy, but he didn’t want to risk an encounter with the firebug alone.

Hurriedly, he left the salvage yard and went back to his house. He went in, and locked the door from inside. He took a deep breath. Then, slowly, he took a look into all the rooms. Only when he was completely sure that there were no unwanted visitors, did he call the book store as agreed.

It was Bob who answered. “Finally, Jupe. Are you all right?”

“Looks that way. I’m going to try to sleep now.”

“Pete just dozed off, too,” Bob said. “Imagine, in the middle of the packing table! Lesley has a stack of books piled up beside him so he won’t roll off. It would be a pity, after all.”

“Be careful not to pack him up and ship him to Alaska.” Jupiter laughed briefly. “Another thing, Bob. Could Lesley check to see if the book is still there? I mean the fireman’s book that the red-head was looking at.”

“You got it, Jupe. What are you chewing on?”

“Me? Uh, something sweet.”

“This case is really getting to you,” Bob said cautiously.

“Well, it’s not exactly pleasant here all alone. Bob, don’t forget about the book. If my theory is correct, the red-head stole it.”

“Stole it?”

“Yeah, just like the other stuff. It’s probably some kind of sport of his or his trademark. You know, Uncle Titus’s fire extinguisher and petrol can are gone. Unfortunately, some of our business cards as well.”

“There you go,” exclaimed Bob.

“Yeah. I think we’re missing about five or ten. That rascal!”

Then they hung up. Jupiter promised to sleep right next to the phone so that he could quickly call for help in case of an emergency.

Bob immediately fulfilled his instruction and went with Lesley to the book shelves to look for the book. Since it was too conspicuous to turn on the store lights, they took a flashlight with them.

Lesley pulled Bob past a few tables, then bent down in front of a shelf. “Here are the fire-fighting books,” she said. “What do you want to look up in that book?”

“Jupiter suspects something,” Bob replied and also went down on his knees. Both of them went through the shelf.

“The book isn’t here,” Lesley finally said and stood up. “That guy probably stole it!”

“He’s certainly not spending money on his hobby,” Bob remarked.

“So what do we do now?” Lesley asked. “The night could be long.”

Bob didn’t have to think long. “We let Pete sleep and take turns keeping watch. You have enough great books to keep us awake! And when we get tired, we’ll wake Pete up and take a nap ourselves.” He looked at her questioningly.

Lesley agreed.

10. Under the Sign of Fire

An uncomfortable pulling and tugging woke Bob. It was Pete working on his shoulder. “Come on,” he whispered. “Something’s happening outside.” Bob was immediately wide awake. A gentle push of the elbow brought Lesley back from her dreams.

It was already light outside. A van had driven into the driveway of the book store. Pete and Bob watched from the window.

“The van is from Hollywood Enterprise,” Pete noted with disappointment. He knew the company. Hollywood Enterprise presented action scenes for various movie sets. The audience were mostly tourists visiting Los Angeles who wanted to get an impression of Hollywood. The show of these well-trained stuntmen was really impressive, and they usually performed scenes from movies.

The driver of the van got out. He had pulled his baseball cap deep into his face. Then he opened the back door of the van, took out a bundle of brochures and carried them to the back entrance of the book store. A few minutes later, there was a knock.

“Lesley,” hissed Pete.

Lesley nodded and trotted to the door.

“It’s nice that someone is here,” Pete heard a bright voice. “Could you please display some advertising brochures in your book store?”

“For what?” Lesley asked.

“For Hollywood Enterprise,” the man said. “It’s our current programme.”

“Sure,” Lesley replied. “No problem.”

“Shall I carry them into the storeroom for you?”

Lesley yawned heartily. “No need. Just put it by the door. I’ll take care of it later.”

“All right.”

The boys heard the thudding of the bundle of brochures. Bob stepped forward and took a peek through the window to get a look at the man. But he had already turned around and went back to the van. A few seconds later, the engine started and the van drove away.

“False alarm,” Lesley said when she came back. “He was just dropping off some brochures. Oh, I’m tired. How long did I sleep?”

Bob looked at his watch. “Almost four hours,” he said, rubbing his eyes. “You got anything to drink?”

“I’ll make some tea. Milk and sugar, Pete?”

“Without everything—sporty and pure,” said Pete.

Bob nodded briefly. “Sugar.”

“I know,” Lesley said and disappeared into the small kitchen in the next room.

They heard her turn on a classical CD and fiddle around with the dishes. Pete stared out the window. Suddenly something struck him and he quickly turned around. “Now I realize what was bothering me,” he shouted.

Bob yawned. He longed for the tea. “What is that?”

“The man with the brochures. He never commented anything on the fire. And there’s garbage all over the place. The police barrier is there, the front door to the storeroom is sooty... but not a word about it, not a question of what happened here. It’s as if the man

wasn't surprised. Even more suspicious, he hypocritically asks if he should take the brochures to the storeroom! And why? He probably wanted to go there to look for the key!"

"You're right!" Bob hit his hand against his forehead. "How could we be so stupid! I'm just not awake yet!"

Pete nodded and continued: "He was not surprised, of course, because he set the fire himself! And when he noticed that someone was here, he quickly left! Anyway, it's unusual for someone to bring brochures at seven in the morning! Most of the stores are still closed."

"Except bakeries!" Lesley came in and brought the tea cups. She had overheard Pete's last sentence.

"So? Which one of you two is gallant enough to go get some sandwiches?" she asked.

"Me!" Pete offered. His discovery had cheered him up. "Even though the van is long gone, we're on a hot lead now."

"Where would you get the lead from?" Lesley played dumb.

"From the van driver! He works at Hollywood Enterprise! I'll let Bob tell you." Pete grabbed his jacket and disappeared.

"You mean this van driver and the book customer could be the same person?" Lesley asked when they were alone. "I didn't ask myself that question. I paid too much attention to his uniform."

Bob nodded. He had felt the same way. "And besides, he had his cap pulled low in his face."

Lesley pondered for a moment. Then she looked at Bob with a startled look. "Wait a minute, from the sound of his voice, it could've been him. It was unusually high."

"And the hair?"

She was thinking. "He had combed it under his cap."

"I'll call Jupiter," Bob decided.

After Pete and Bob gobbled down the sandwiches for breakfast, they left Booksmith and returned to the Jones's home. Jupiter was in a bad mood. He had slept badly and had not yet had a proper breakfast. Meanwhile Bob made some tea, then they sat together in the kitchen to discuss the situation.

"It's hard to think when we are hungry," the First Investigator said apologetically and placed a thick slice of sausage on the roll. Then he took a considerable sip from his teacup. "Ah, that's better."

"Okay, let's take stock. If you don't mind, I'll get right to it," Jupiter said. "We have two arson attacks—one small and one big—Joe's Boat Rentals and Booksmith."

"This suggests that the next fire will be even bigger," Pete interrupted him. "If it's a series."

Jupiter swallowed a bite. "Fellas, it's a show! We have a caller who announces the fires and says the strange sentences that you have heard: 'Under the sign of fire, it has happened twice... All luck explodes!' It's a very unusual phrase, as if it contains a message."

"Why didn't you mention this phrase to Detective Franks?" Bob wanted to know.

"Hmm." Jupiter chewed on a sausage roll. "He would have either taken it as a challenge or not taken it seriously. I'd rather that we have a small knowledge advantage this way."

"Once, twice," Bob pondered, "that would indicate three or more times."

"Also, twice he had ended his message with 'All luck explodes!'" Jupe said.

"But what is striking is that the firebug said 'explodes' not 'burns'," Bob added.

“What’s that supposed to mean?” Impatiently, Pete shook his head. “Luck can’t explode!”

“With a sentence like that, there has to mean something. Maybe...” Jupiter took a sip and thought. “... Maybe the third attack will be with a bomb.”

“That would be huge,” Pete threw in.

Since all the rolls were eaten, Jupiter got himself a chocolate yoghurt from the refrigerator. “Is there anything that connects the boat renter Joe and the bookseller Smith and also has to do with luck?” he asked and sat down again.

They were puzzled, but no one had any idea, except that both businesses were obviously doing quite well, which might have something to do with luck.

“Joe and Mr Smith are also about the same age,” Pete still noticed, “but that can’t necessarily be a coincidence.”

“Okay, we’re not getting anywhere like this. What about the firebug himself?” Bob asked his colleagues.

Here Jupiter knew his way around. “Arsonists or bombers are often loners,” he reported. “It appears that the person is highly intelligent, but has some psychological problems which leads to the fact that he is committing these attacks. Such people like to play games and think they are superior. In their actions, they feel their power over other people and get high on it.”

“If only we could get on the trail of that red-headed curly-haired man,” Bob said. “After all, he’s our prime suspect.”

“Yes,” Jupiter agreed. “Look, I have a theory. Maybe he worked in the fire department and got fired. He found it humiliating. But he can’t get away from this story and collects all kinds of stuff about fire-fighting—hand extinguishers, books, and so on—hence his interest in the salvage yard here. In such a place, you can always find some suitable objects that have to do with fire. And for the fires, he starts out of revenge. Maybe he felt he was being punished unfairly.”

“Interesting theory, Juve,” Bob remarked. “But then we have another suspect.”

“The driver of Hollywood Enterprise,” Pete recalled, “if it’s not one and the same person.”

Jupiter pulled out the key that Lesley had found in the book store and laid it on the table in front of him. “It’s probably the firebug’s,” he said. “If we find the lock that matches this key, the mystery is solved.”

“Well, how do you start?” Pete ironically interjected. “There’s probably a hundred thousand locks in Rocky Beach.”

Of course, Jupiter was aware of that. He was already thinking in another direction. “And there is something else we should pursue.” With a gesture of his hand, he simply pushed the empty yoghurt cup aside without wanting any more. His excessive hunger seemed to have been finally tamed. “The culprit always calls me instead of the fire department. In this way, he directs suspicion to The Three Investigators. So he must have some kind of relationship with us, however remote.”

“I see you’ve used the night to think,” Bob said. “I’m gonna go over our old cases. Maybe someone’s out to get back at us.”

“Right,” Juve agreed. “And then check all the newspaper articles that dealt with fires.”

“Sure, I will, Juve. It’s gonna take a while, though.” Bob looked up. “We haven’t talked about the locations of the attacks.”

Pete waved him down. “You mean Joe’s Boat Rentals and Booksmith? What else to talk about that?”

“Wait.” Jupiter got up and went into the living room. A short time later, he came back with a map of Rocky Beach and indicated with a nod that he wanted to spread it out on the table. “Make way, fellas.” Pete and Bob hurriedly pushed the breakfast leftovers aside.

Jupe laid the plan on the table and smoothed the paper so firmly that the bread crumbs crackled underneath him. “Let’s see if there is any trend in the firebug’s choice of locations for the attacks... Here is Joe’s Boat Rentals,” Jupe said and drew a cross on the map. “And here is Booksmith.” He drew another cross. “We’ll play with a little geometry. Maybe that will give us a clue. If we double the line between the two points over here, then we get...”

“... to the mountains,” Bob said. “There’s nothing there but bushes and rock.”

Jupiter frowned. “True. If we extend the line in the other direction, we get the ocean. So a straight line leads nowhere. Perhaps we can draw other figures,” he said.

Suddenly his face lit up. “‘Under the sign of fire’, that’s what the caller said! Isn’t that a clue? Let’s see what the signs of fire are.”

Bob ran over to Headquarters and came back a few moments later. He proudly carried a thick book of symbols in his hands. “Fire, fire...” he muttered as he turned the pages of the book. “The dragon unites all four elements—fire, water, air, earth—but it is not a dragon.”

Pete stood up and looked over his shoulder. “The sun as a symbol of fire, well, we can’t do anything with that, can we?”

“Sun—a circular shape,” pondered Jupiter, “but that makes no sense. To draw a circle, we need another point.”

Suddenly, Pete seemed to have discovered something and was driving around in Bob’s book with his index finger. “Look here.”

“Hey, Pete, what’s going on?” Bob was outraged and pulled the book aside. “Get your greasy fingers off the book.”

“Alchemy,” Pete insisted. “Surely it has something to do with fire?”

“That’s right, Pete,” Jupiter said excitedly, “but again with earth, air and water. A medieval doctrine of perfection. Aristotle’s thesis of the four elements continues to have an effect in it, as does the idea of a gradual path to perfection. Plato, as you know...”

“Plato?” Bob looked at Jupe in astonishment. “What are you on to? I don’t understand a word you’re saying.”

“It is likely that his mother studied philosophy,” Pete surmised, “while she was pregnant with him.”

“Then yours must have been at the gym from morning to night,” Jupiter remarked, slightly annoyed.

Bob grinned and continued to turn the pages of the book. “There! I got it! Alchemy. Page 117... Ah, yes... Listen! The alchemists of the Middle Ages had a symbol for fire. What do you think it is? A triangle, of course! And usually an equilateral one!”

“Wow!” said Jupiter. “I did not know that! My mother must have missed this one!”

He bent over the map. Although he was very impatient, Jupiter calmly measured the length of the line on the map connecting Joe’s Boat Rentals and Booksmith. This was to be one side of the equilateral triangle. Then he drew two more lines of the same length to one side to form the other two sides of the triangle.

“Look!” Jupiter exclaimed. “The third point of the triangle is at the petrol station that Jimmy Stewart inherited. I wonder if he’s the next target of the firebug.”

“Petrol station?” Pete turned pale. “If it catches fire, that’s when it’ll go off big time!”

Jupiter nodded. “That would be an inferno!” He looked at the map. “Fortunately, there are no other buildings nearby.”

“But you could also draw a triangle to the other side as well,” Bob excitedly interjected. “Jupe, I estimate that it’ll hit the salvage yard right here!”

Jupiter gasped and measured the lines. Suddenly he turned pale and looked up. Bob was right. The next destination could be the petrol station... or The Jones Salvage Yard!

Then the phone rang.

“Probably Detective Franks,” Jupiter said, grabbing the phone.

But it was Mrs Ferguson. “Sorry to bother you,” she said, “but there he is again, that man, you know, the one who nearly ran over me. He’s walking in front of your salvage yard right now. Now you can finally do the job and take him to task.”

“Thank you, Mrs Ferguson,” cried Jupiter. “Stay in your apartment. It’s safer that way. We’ll take care of it right away.” He hung up.

“Come on,” he shouted, “the red-head’s back! Let’s get him!”

11. Confrontation

The Three Investigators dropped everything and ran out. After they passed the main gate, they stopped and looked around.

“There he is,” cried Jupiter. The man just came around the corner. He was not exactly very tall. His red hair shone in the morning sun. At once the three boys set themselves in motion. The man noticed them, turned around and ran away.

“We’ll get him,” Pete gasped, and he really stepped on it.

Since he was the fastest runner among the three, he soon left Bob and especially Jupiter behind. As he shot around the corner, he saw the red-head running through a gate into the courtyard of O’Neal’s Nursery and Garden Supplies. There he would be trapped, Pete rejoiced inwardly, and took another step forward. He knew that the nursery offered no escape route—no back exit, just high fences, but it was a good place to hide.

He sprinted through the gate and slowed down. The Second Investigator looked around searching, and wanted to go in to look for the man. Luckily Bob just came running and Pete asked him to block the entrance together with Jupiter. Bob nodded and positioned himself at the entrance.

Pete examined the terrain and first decided on a row of bushes behind which someone could hide well. In his excitement, he hadn’t paid any attention to Mr O’Neal, the owner of the nursery, who pulled off his gloves and walked towards Pete.

“Can I help you, Pete?”

“Hello, Mr O’Neal. I’m looking for a man who just ran onto your property.”

The gardener shook his head. “I didn’t notice anything... but I wasn’t looking at the entrance.”

“I’ll have a look around, thanks.” Pete nodded at the gardener, who looked at him shaking his head.

Pete walked along the bushes, but couldn’t see anyone. Then he noticed a storage rack, perhaps two metres high, in which Mr O’Neal stored watering cans, pots, tubs and buckets.

Pete went closer. He looked at the shelves attentively. It was positioned near to the fence but he suspected that there was a gap between the rack and the fence. Danger was threatening here, he sensed that. Again and again, he paused and listened, always prepared for an unpleasant surprise.

He looked up and saw that one of the pots on the top shelf seemed to be placed too far forward. It almost threatened to fall off. Mr O’Neal would never have stored it like this. Suddenly, the big pot was pushed down towards Pete. Just in time, he jumped out of the way and the pot fell and crashed onto the ground.

Startled, Pete looked down at the fragments of the pot. Quickly, he crept to one end of the rack and went round it.

The red-haired man stood directly in front of him between the rack and the fence. He stared into Pete’s eyes. Threateningly he held a shovel in his hands and slowly approached him. Pete took a quick look to the side. His opponent then threw the shovel at him, but his aim was poor. Pete got hold of the tool and straightened up. Now he had the better cards.

“Give up,” he shouted. “Before something worse happens!”

“You rascal!” the man cried and he started to climb up the rack.

Pete charged forward with the shovel, but the man was really very quick and he had already reached almost to the top of the rack. From there, he leapt over the tall fence and onto the other side.

“Damn!” Pete quickly estimated whether he could follow the man by jumping off the rack in the same way, but the man had gone too far ahead. “I’ll never make it,” he thought. “The risk is too great.”

Then Pete saw the man scurrying to the road and in a short while, he had disappeared from Pete’s field of vision.

Now voices started to come up to him. Jupiter and Bob appeared with Mr O’Neal. The owner shouted out: “Pete, have you gone completely crazy? What’s going on here?”

Pete bent over the edge. “Excuse me, Mr O’Neal. I can explain everything!”

Disappointed, he approached them and reported what he had experienced. Jupiter and Bob tried to comfort him, but Pete was angry.

“He shouldn’t have got away from me,” he grumbled. “But I did not expect him to be so quick.”

Together, they helped the gardener to clean up the broken pieces of the pot. Mr O’Neal didn’t know what to make of all this and Pete promised to help him work for a few hours over the next few days as compensation for his loss.

“Nevertheless, we have made a small step forward,” Jupiter tried to lift the spirits again when they left the nursery. “Only stuntmen can make such a leap. This suggests that our man and the delivery van driver are one and the same person. I think we’ll have to take a closer look at the stunt show of Hollywood Enterprise.”

Slightly disillusioned, they arrived back at the salvage yard a few minutes later. In the meantime a few customers had gathered outside the gate and Jupiter let them in. Pete helped him, while Bob went into the kitchen to check what the fridge could provide for lunch. He was also supposed to take incoming phone calls.

Just as he discovered a large pudding, the phone rang. It was Mrs Ferguson, whom Bob had forgotten in all the excitement. He was about to make a statement when the old lady interrupted him. “It’s all right, Bob. I was watching from the window. He got away from you.” She moaned. “Maybe it’s about time I got the police involved in this, don’t you think?”

Bob was not pleased about that at all. “No, no,” he said quickly. “Next time we’ll be better prepared. I promise you, Mrs Ferguson, we will find the man!”

After this conversation, nobody called for a while and Bob tried the pudding from Aunt Mathilda. It was the best.

Then Detective Franks called and told Bob that they were monitoring the phone from now on. He also wanted to know what was new.

“Not much,” Bob answered. Just to be on the safe side, he didn’t tell him about the chase. But he promised the detective that Jupiter would return his call.

In the next few hours, Jupiter was busy with customers at the salvage yard, so he had no time to discuss with Bob and Pete about how to proceed. Finally at 4 pm, he decided to close the salvage yard for the day—earlier than usual.

“I take my job covering for Uncle Titus seriously,” explained Jupiter. “It is not easy to pursue two important tasks at the same time. And besides, I’ve been thinking...”

“About what?” Bob asked mechanically.

"I'm going to tell Detective Franks about our theory. The perpetrator's next target is the petrol station or our salvage yard. It's just too dangerous. With the petrol station on the line, every second is precious. Lives are in danger. So far, the firebug has been careful not to harm anyone. But after what happened at the nursery, I'm not so sure. Also, I can't jeopardize Uncle Titus's business."

"I'm glad you feel that way," Bob replied. "A moment ago, Pete and I were talking about the same thing."

They went back into the Jones's house and sat at the kitchen table. Bob had left some pudding, which Jupiter ate in no time. When the bowl was licked clean, he called the detective back and told him about their suspicions.

Franks was very pleased about the emerging cooperation. "Good, Jupiter. The triangle sounds very interesting. And I suppose you don't believe in coincidences."

"If the caller hadn't called here twice, it would be easier for me to hope for a coincidence."

"You may be right. We have to be sure and guard both places. I will increase the police force and inform the fire department as well."

"Okay, Detective."

"You're all in the house together?"

"Yes, Mr Franks. We'll stay here. I think the caller will get back to me. My uncle and aunt are not back yet. The firebug will take advantage of that."

"Fine. But if he hits your salvage yard, you have to get out. And another thing, Jupiter..."

"Yeah?"

"Remember, we're tapping your home phone. We'll hear everything. You can tell your relatives, but you can't tell anyone else!"

"All right, Mr Franks." Jupiter hung up. He stood there somewhat perplexed. Then he went over to the kitchen table and pulled up the pudding bowl. He looked in. "Are there any more?" he muttered disappointedly.

"What's the matter with you, Jupe?" Bob wanted to know.

Jupe's hand wandered to his lower lip. "This firebug is annoying me," he said. "I'm still not sure whether he is coming after me!"

"Jupe, we're still here." Bob pulled him onto a chair. "Now, just sit down. I'll go to Hollywood Enterprise to find the red-head. The show starts at five. I'll follow him. You wait here. After that, we'll decide what to do. The three of us should be able to handle it." He looked at Pete. "Of course I could use you too, Pete. But maybe it's better if you stay with Jupiter and watch with him here."

Pete nodded. Anyway, he hadn't much desire to meet the red-head again so soon.

Bob patted Jupiter on the shoulder encouragingly. "Well say something, Jupe. Your mood goes up and down like a swing... or do you want to go too? Of course, the three of us can go."

"No," said Jupiter. "I won't leave the salvage yard. Detective Franks won't get me out of here either."

"Should Pete stay with you?" Bob asked.

"I'd prefer it that way."

Bob got up. "Okay. Then I gotta go. Hollywood Enterprise is on its way to Los Angeles."

"Make sure Franks doesn't find out about your trip," Pete said.

"Unfortunately, I'm going to violate Detective Franks's order not to leave Rocky Beach. but there's nothing I can do about it," Bob said. "I will go out through Red Gate Rover. The main entrance is guaranteed to be watched by the police. My bike's outside anyway. When I

find the red-head, I'll follow him carefully. I don't want him to suspect anything. I'll call you where possible."

"And the detective is listening," Pete added. "Do you think that's good?"

"We'll just agree on a code word. We'll just call the red-head John... John Locke."

Even Jupiter had to grin. "Okay," he said, but his voice sounded faint.

12. An Explosive Show

Bob had to wait a while at the ticket booth of Hollywood Enterprise. He had been caught in the middle of a bunch of tourists who had come from the East Coast to Los Angeles to see Hollywood. They looked around curiously, in anticipation of the movie actors' stunt show.

Bob squeezed between them and got a ticket. He took a seat at the front area of the grandstand. Just as he was about to open the programme booklet, the show began.

Bob wasn't quite sure what to look for. He was desperately hoping to find the red-head among the stuntmen. Then he would wait for the end of the show, inform Jupiter and start the pursuit.

A man entered the stage. He turned out to be a funny host. He quickly captured his audience, gave some impressive figures about the stuntmen's engagements and from then on led very snappily through the programme.

It began with a western scenario. After at least twenty minutes of shooting with all kinds of rider scenes, attacks, action sequences and a huge number of blanks fired, the stage turned and the audience found itself in a science fiction landscape.

Bob became restless. Everything was exciting and varied, but there was no clue as to who the firebug was. There was no sign of the red-head.

After the last UFO had taken off, the stage kept turning and a big city scenery opened up. Now it was about a crime story. A small man, who at first only stood around inconspicuously and seemed to look at the scenery, suddenly tampered with a parked car. As part of the show, the man ran away and the car exploded. Technically, the fireworks display was superb. The other stuntmen threw themselves to the side as if they felt the shock wave.

Everything was calculated exactly for the show. A police car swept around the corner, howling and flashing blue lights. Two policemen jumped out and started chasing the bomber. It went over garbage cans and trucks, through the windows of the houses, onto the roofs and daring jumps back onto passing cars. For a moment, Bob had to think of the chase in the nursery, then the show took him completely over again.

The bomber got hold of a skateboard and raced along a track that ran across the auditorium, and finally swept down a giant slide. It was a wild chase that completely captured Bob's attention and it only found its finale at the end of the slide. There, one of the policemen picked up the criminal, handcuffed him and took him away.

Bob had followed the scene with his mouth open. The bomber of the show—did he have anything to do with the caller? Well, he wasn't a red-head, but still... he could have worn a wig.

Bob looked it up in the programme booklet. The performer was Earnie Burns, no doubt a stage name. Bob had to make a decision—keep looking for the red-head or take care of this man here. He rolled up the programme booklet and put it in his pocket.

Bob hurriedly left the grandstand and ignored the uncomprehending looks he attracted. It took him a few minutes to find the entrance to the small administration building. A man approached him and held the door open for him. Bob slipped inside, but was stopped by a doorman. "Where to, son?"

"I'm looking for Earnie Burns." Bob waved the programme. "I'd love to get his autograph. I think he just walked in here after his performance."

"True. But you won't get your signature. Mr Burns is already on his way home. You just missed him by a minute or so. I'm sorry."

"Was it the man who just went out?"

"No, that was Ron Davies. He doubles Johnny Rap. Mr Burns isn't that famous. And besides, if you've only seen him in the show, you'll hardly recognize him. Earnie appears in a mask." The doorman leaned over. "Well, he usually goes home by bus. If you hurry, you might be able to catch him at the bus stop over there."

"Thank you, sir." Bob was about to start running when something occurred to him. "One more thing, mister. Are you currently distributing leaflets in Rocky Beach stores?"

"We do that sometimes, young man. But not right now. Usually it will be just before a new season starts."

"Thanks, mister." Bob turned and ran to the place where he parked his bike. He jumped up and immediately headed for the bus stop.

He was lucky. Just as he turned into the street, he saw the doors of bus number 714 close. There were nobody left at the bus stop so Bob presumed that the stuntman had just got into this bus.

Bob put all his strength into the pedals and took off in pursuit. After a few curves, the bus stopped at the first stop. Bob fixed his eyes on the people getting off. There were three women and one man. But the man was definitely bigger than the stuntman. Earnie Burns still had to be on the bus.

It was no different at the next few stops. Since they were not so far apart, Bob was able to keep up well on his bike. At the sixth stop, he was particularly curious, for this was where the line ended, so all passengers would have to disembark.

Among the people who got off, Bob found a man who could be Earnie Burns in size. To get a closer look at him, Bob let the bike roll on and stopped at a bicycle shop where there were a whole range of bikes placed outside for sale. He got off and pretended to be interested in the bikes. In reality, he was watching the man.

The man moved elastically, well-trained, almost like a performer. He was slim and relatively short, and Bob estimated him to be no more than 160 centimetres tall. He had short dark hair, wore plain blue jeans and a black T-shirt.

Bus number 714 left without any more passengers, presumably returning to the depot. The man lit a cigarette, and looked down the street.

A few metres away, Bob saw a telephone booth. Actually, it was time to inform Jupiter. So he walked inconspicuously and got into the phone booth. The man was still at the bus stop, possibly waiting for a connecting bus. And what if he gets on the next bus? Bob decided to wait. Surely... surely there would be another opportunity later to call Jupe. He picked up the receiver and pretended to talk on the phone while still keeping a close watch at the man.

After a few minutes, came a bus with which Bob had often taken. It was the bus that passes by the salvage yard. The man carelessly threw away his cigarette and got on it.

Almost instantaneously, Bob put back the receiver. He took two quick steps, got on his bike and started pedalling furiously after the bus.

Bob was familiar with this bus route. He stepped on it, passed a traffic light that had just jumped to red, took a short-cut across a side street and arrived just in time to catch the bus's first stop. The man did not get off. So the pursuit continued. Bob was beginning to lose his breath. Fortunately, he was able to spot the man on the bus.

He stood facing forward and held on to a backrest grip. Bob pedalled as fast as he could. Just a few more stops, then they were near the salvage yard. Was Earnie Burns on his way there?

The bus turned a corner. Now it was time. Bob saw the man walking to the exit. The bus stopped and the man got off. A van stopped just behind the bus and that provided Bob with a cover as he got off his bike. Now he was convinced that Earnie Burns had something to do with the case. If he really wanted to get to Jupiter, he had to warn his friend. The only chance he had was to ride right past the man. That way, he might get two or three minutes ahead of him. Taking a detour was out of the question as it would take too long. Bob decided to take the risk.

But then, at that moment, the man unexpectedly turned into a side street and headed for a small three-storey residential building.

“Hey! That’s where Mrs Ferguson lives,” Bob thought to himself. Was that a coincidence? Or was there a connection? Bob quickly considered all the possibilities. Perhaps Earnie Burns knew that Mrs Ferguson was watching him. If that is the case, then the old woman would be in great danger. But what could that be about? Was it connected with the fires? After all, Burns could have been an ally of the red-head who had now decided to go after Mrs Ferguson.

Bob kept a safe distance, but he clearly saw the man entering the apartment building. He hurried to the front door and leaned his bike against the wall. The main entrance was open. Bob quickly checked the names of the tenants at the intercom panel, as what Jupiter had done earlier, and found that Mrs Ferguson lived in a unit on the third floor. He then crept into the hall and listened. Then he heard a door slammed shut in an upper floor!

“I hope I’m not too late,” Bob thought. Taking two steps at a time, he ran up floor by floor. It took the last of his strength, the muscles in his legs were already tensed from the rigorous cycling. Gasping for breath, he finally stopped at Mrs Ferguson’s door.

Horried, he stared at the lock—someone had chiselled the lock away and Mrs Ferguson’s door had been forced open! There was a loud rattling noise coming from the apartment, followed by a dull thud. He had to act immediately.

“Mrs Ferguson,” Bob yelled and threw himself against the door. “Mrs Ferguson! Are you in there?” The door swung open and Bob almost flew into the apartment. One hand grabbed him and pulled him aside. Then Bob’s arm was twisted behind his back.

Bob writhed in pain and looked up. A face appeared before him, a face that laughed gloatingly. It was the face of Mrs Ferguson!

13. A Shock for Bob

“Mrs Ferguson!” In surprise, Bob was paralyzed for a moment. He couldn’t take his eyes off her wrinkled face.

“You rascal!” hissed Mrs Ferguson.

Bob freed himself from the rigid grip and looked down at her. It was shocking. The head belonged to Mrs Ferguson, but the body belonged to Earnie Burns!

Bob felt a slight nausea in the stomach area. With his free hand, Burns pulled off his mask and turned himself completely into the stuntman. Now Bob understood that Earnie Burns and Mrs Ferguson were one and the same person. Mrs Ferguson was nothing more than Earnie Burns in disguise. But how was it all connected?

Burns was still holding him tight. Bob never stood a chance against the stuntman.

“What am I gonna do with you,” he said, and Bob winced when he heard the high-pitched voice. No wonder he could dress up as an old woman without anyone noticing. His height and slim stature was just about right.

Bob let his eyes wander. He could see through the door into the adjoining room, which was a bedroom. On an unmade bed lay carelessly thrown clothes, a crate of beer stood next to the bedside table and under the bed a fire extinguisher peeked out—probably the one from the salvage yard.

“Why did you have to come here, you stupid boy,” Burns insulted Bob. “You are upsetting all my plans. It’s just a shame what happened to me with that lock, otherwise you never would have come in here.”

Bob did not say anything. Earnie Burns pushed him forward a little.

“You’re in a lot of trouble—just before my grand finale.” He took a breath and then he kept talking quieter. “What am I going to do with you? I’ll just keep you locked up in here until it’s all over.”

He tried to push him on, but Bob resisted. He turned his head over his shoulder. “You’re the firebug,” he said to Burns.

The man snorted contemptuously. “What do you know? You haven’t got a shred of proof!”

“The front door! It’s been broken into. And I’ll tell you by whom—you did it yourself! You lost the key when you set the fire at Booksmith.”

“Damn... you found the key?” he asked threateningly.

He pushed Bob’s arm, which was still twisted onto his back, a little further. “Give me the key!”

“Ow! You’re hurting me! I don’t have the key with me! We... we hid it in the salvage yard.”

The man did not believe him. He searched Bob as best he could, from top to bottom. But all he could find was Bob’s keys, his wallet and a piece of green chalk.

Finally, Burns let Bob go. “At least the police never got hold of the key. And tomorrow I’ll be gone, and all you’ll have is a Mrs Ferguson who doesn’t really exist.”

“But...” Bob bit his lips. He wanted to tell Burns that he knew where he worked, but just in time, he changed his mind. The more he knew, the more dangerous he was to Burns, and

that wasn't the best thing to do in the current situation.

"But what?" Burns asked.

"But, uh, I know where you live!"

The man laughed fiercely. "Of course this isn't my real apartment. Do you think I'm that stupid? Buddy, I'm smarter than all of you combined."

Bob would have liked to contradict him, but he kept his temper.

"Who are you really?" Bob asked instead.

"I won't tell you, kiddo, because the more you know, the more I have to worry about your future. So you listen to me. It's in your own best interest to shut up now, if you're smart."

Bob nodded. "Mrs, uh, Mr Ferguson, at least tell me what you're up to. Anyway, I can't get in your way now."

"Quiet, I said! It's enough that you blew my cover."

"I'm calm, mister."

The man pulled Bob into a storeroom and stood in the doorway. "Nobody's gonna hear you in here," he said. "The apartment below is empty. You can knock there till your hands fall off."

Bob quickly looked around. The room had no window and was small and narrow. "How long do you expect me to stay in there?" he asked.

"We shall see..."

Only little light fell through the open door. Burns stood beside him and seemed to control the room. Bob spotted the coat sewn together from colourful rags lying on a shelf. It was the coat Earnie Burns had always used in his Ferguson disguise. Underneath him, a red-blond curly wig peeked out. Now it was clear—the red-head was also one of the disguises of this artist of transformation. Mrs Ferguson and the red-head had never shown up together—probably not even during the alleged hit-and-run incident—and that too, was probably faked. Bob recalled that The Three Investigators had not seen the car, but only heard it.

"Mister, how did you actually manage to get hit by the car?" Bob asked.

"Can't you ever shut up, kid?"

"You're dressed as Mrs Ferguson. And if I read the wig correctly, you're also the red-headed motorist who nearly hit her. Now, how did you do that?"

"No, I wasn't driving." The man laughed. "It was a friend of mine. He did me the favour by staging a hit-and-run on the street. And now, you can stop asking! Just shut up!"

Bob nodded. So that's what happened. And it was no problem for a stuntman to act out a hit-and-run incident. It was one of his easiest exercises.

Burns seemed to be looking for something else and Bob scanned the other things that were in the storeroom.

Apart from some food supplies, there was a small parcel gift-wrapped with paper that featured red roses. There was nothing else that could help him get out of here.

The man obviously saw it the same way. "You can't do any harm with this stuff. Let me just take this away." He stepped up to the shelf and carefully took down the parcel. "This nice present is meant for someone very special!"

"What's that for?" Bob asked curiously.

Earnie Burns giggled and it sounded like Mrs Ferguson giggling. "Let's call it 'The Oriental Blast'—fireworks of great magnitude."

"A bomb?" Bob got spooked. He involuntarily quoted the sentence the caller had said to Jupiter. "'Under the sign of fire, it has happened twice... All luck explodes!'"

"Yes, smart ass, if you want to know, this bomb will explode if you open the parcel!"

Bob was sweating. "You're crazy," he said.

Burns stared at him.

"And whom will you give the parcel to?" Bob asked quickly.

Instead of an answer, Earnie Burns gave Bob a push and got out of the storeroom. With one swing, the door closed and Bob was in the dark. Then he heard the key turn.

Hectically, he began to look for a light switch, but he found none. If only he had Pete's lock picks with him, he thought. But then it occurred to him that Burns would have taken the tool long ago during his body search.

Above all, he must warn Jupiter and Pete, he thought. But how? He heard Earnie Burns moving around in the apartment. He's up to something, and it must have something to do with that parcel. He's probably putting finishing touches to it now.

Feverishly Bob thought about how he could send Juve a message, but the situation seemed hopeless. Bob had practically nothing on him, and he couldn't see anything in the dark room. He tried to feel around. There was nothing in the room except for the food supplies and Mrs Ferguson's coat.

Time passed. Bob was trapped in the firebug's pitch-dark room. Luckily his watch had luminous numerals, so he could see that the evening was approaching. Then he heard something in the apartment. Earnie Burns seemed to be on the phone. Bob put his ear to the door and he was surprised to hear how easily the man could change his voice to sound like Mrs Ferguson.

"Jupiter, I wanted to call you dear boy because I saw something again... yes... the red-headed man who hit me, well, I think his car just drove past your salvage yard... Have I seen Bob? No, Jupiter, I haven't. Has he disappeared? ... Don't worry, he must have been distracted. These young people today... Oh yes, Jupiter, I'll be glad to do that for you. I'll look out for him as well."

Bob started pounding on the door like crazy. "Here I am!" he yelled. "Juve, I'm here!"

He heard a door slam. Earnie Burns had taken the phone into another room so Bob's cries for help could not be heard. In earnest, Bob hoped that Jupiter had overheard something anyway.

Less than two minutes later, the man unlocked the door to the storeroom. Bob automatically backed away.

"You deserved a beating," the man shouted and rushed in. "Be glad I don't have time for this now! But I'm going to have a word with you."

Bob stood trembling in the corner and watched as the firebug pulled the colourful coat he needed for his appearance as Mrs Ferguson from the shelf. There was no escape in sight. The stuntman was physically too much for him to handle. Then Earnie walked out again, slammed the door and locked it.

Bob had already prepared himself for a long wait when the door was ripped open again. Burns stood before him in full Mrs Ferguson gear. "Come out here!"

Bob cautiously stepped out of the storeroom, ready for an unpleasant surprise. But Burns held out only a note to him.

"Hello Jupiter," Bob read. "This is Bob. Don't worry. I'm still busy and I won't get back to you for two hours. Stay at home no matter what happens, you hear? Give my regards to Pete. Bye, I'm in a hurry."

"What is this?" he asked, although he had an idea of what the man was up to.

Earnie Burns smiled. "You call your friends and read this to them—word for word. But don't try anything funny if you value your life, and if you want to see your buddies again. Because if you make a mistake, I'm gonna run you into a knife."

“You’re threatening me!” Bob gasped.

“Indeed. Go on, read the words. I want to hear how it sounds.”

Bob read what the man had written down.

“Not so lame, boy, say it naturally, not just read it!”

Bob tried to calm down and read the text again. While reading, Bob wondered how could he inconspicuously pass a message to Jupe. He had to come up with a plan how he could get Jupe’s attention by a little slip of the tongue.

Unexpectedly, Burns smiled. “Good! I got it all on tape because I don’t trust you at all. Now, get back into the storeroom.”

The man locked Bob up again. “Good night,” he shouted through the closed door. “If you’re hungry, help yourself. I won’t need anything else in here.”

A few minutes later, Bob heard the front door slam shut.

14. Jupiter on a Hot Trail

“Where is Bob?” Jupiter asked impatiently. Grimly he stared at the phone as if he could make it ring. He was all the more surprised when it actually rang.

Jupiter answered. “Goodness, Bob,” he shouted. “What is it? ... Stay here? ... Where are you? Tell me...”

Jupiter held the receiver in his hand and shook it. “He hung up!” he shouted. “What was that?”

Pete, who was sitting next to Juve, looked at him thoughtfully. “Why was Bob in such a hurry?” he asked. “On the other hand, I’m glad he finally called. Probably he couldn’t talk for long and wanted to get in touch briefly so we wouldn’t worry... and he knows the police are listening in.”

“It was strange, though.” Jupiter sat down at the kitchen table again. “But I guess you’re right. He’s probably following the red-head.” He pinched his lower lip. “But his voice sounded somehow as tinny as if he had called from a really bad phone booth or from a cheap mobile phone. And what about the agreed-upon code word ‘John Locke’?”

They could not talk about it any further for the time being, because the phone rang again. It was Detective Franks, who wanted to know what the call from Bob was about.

“All this time I thought Bob was with you,” he said. “That was the deal we made... or were you really behind those mysterious phone calls yourself?”

“No, of course not,” Jupiter rushed to say. Helplessly he looked at Pete, who suddenly had an intuition.

“Cousin,” Pete whispered.

“Uh, yes,” said Jupiter. “Bob does have a cousin visiting. And since they can’t go to San Diego, he met her briefly at a bar in Rocky Beach. Didn’t your police patrol spot him?”

“No,” Detective Franks had to admit.

“It’s not our fault,” said Jupiter as innocently as possible. But he had one more question. “Were you able to trace the call, Detective Franks? Then you know where he is. He didn’t tell us where he was.”

“No, everything was far too short for that.”

“Too bad,” said Jupiter. He hung up and went to the window. It was getting dark outside. It was the time of the mysterious caller.

The police checked the surroundings of The Jones Salvage Yard as inconspicuously as possible. The petrol station was also under surveillance, as Detective Franks had told them. And the fire department had been alerted to stand by.

Juve remained silent for a while and was lost in thought. Pete noticed how it worked on him.

Suddenly Juve picked up the phone. “I have to call Joe’s Boat Rentals,” he said. “I need to talk to Joe.”

“Gee, Juve,” exclaimed Pete in horror. “What you are thinking about now! The police are monitoring the phone.”

“The firebug takes advantage of the fact that Aunt Mathilda is not here,” claimed Jupiter. “Somehow I have a hunch...” He picked up the phone, but Pete pressed down on the switch

hook.

“What are you doing?” Jupe said.

“You want the detective to hear everything?”

Jupe looked at him. “Of course not,” he said sheepishly.

“Then make the phone call from Headquarters,” Pete suggested.

“Good idea,” Jupe said and he grabbed the key and went over to Headquarters with Pete. They had their own phone there that was of a different number. It wasn’t necessary to let Franks know about this because the firebug had always called the home phone of the Jones family.

On entering Headquarters, Jupe asked Pete: “Do you remember last week when we were at Joe’s for the diving course, Joe said that he would be away for a few days. Do you remember that?”

“Come to think of that, I do remember him telling us that,” Pete replied.

“I’ll confirm it now,” Jupe said and dialled Joe’s Boat Rentals and got through immediately. “Jupiter Jones here. I’d like to speak to Joe... No? ... He’s not there? ... When? ... Tomorrow? ... Okay! Thanks.” Jupiter hung up, and went pale.

“What do you know?” Jupe turned to Pete. “Can you guess where he is? In San Francisco! Joe is in San Francisco... I have to call Lesley now! I think we’re really onto something now.”

Jupiter dialled the number of Booksmith. “Jupiter Jones here. Hello Lesley, you’re still in the shop? ... Oh, about the fire... You’ve cleaned up... How are you? ... Is Mr Smith there?”

Pete jumped up and turned on the loudspeaker. “He came back today,” Lesley said. “He’s back earlier because of the fire. The police had some questions for him too.”

“Where was he, Lesley?”

“In San Francisco. At a reunion, I think.”

“A reunion! Thanks, Lesley.” Jupiter hung up.

Pete started to stutter. “This can’t be a coincidence! Joe and Mr Smith are there; and Uncle Titus and Aunt Mathilda are there as well!”

Jupiter nodded. “There is a connection. If only I knew what it was...”

“Come Jupe, I’ll call the petrol station and ask for the owner, Jimmy Stewart.” Pete grabbed the phone. From an employee of the petrol station, he learned what he had already guessed—Jimmy Stewart had gone away for the weekend... to San Francisco!

“The trail gets hot,” Pete said. “Very hot!”

Jupiter and Pete went back into the Jones’s house and spent the next minutes coming out with wild speculations. The First Investigator showed signs of renewed vigour, as Pete noted with relief.

One thought remained above all—the firebug must have had something to do with the school to which Aunt Mathilda and Uncle Titus attended. He probably came from their environment and was a student there at that time.

Jupiter decided to call Aunt Mathilda and Uncle Titus. They had left the number of the hotel where they were staying. On the pinboard were all kinds of notes—shopping lists, cinema and business cards, scribbled telephone numbers.

“Aunt Mathilda should tidy up,” muttered Jupiter. Finally, he found the number.

Jupiter and Pete went back to Headquarters. Jupe turned on the loudspeaker attached to the phone and proceeded to call the hotel. A woman from the reception desk answered. Unfortunately, Jupiter only received the information that the group was on a tour through San

Francisco and was not expected back until late in the evening. Disappointed, he hung up again.

"But Mr Smith is back in Rocky Beach," Jupiter said aloud to himself. So he phoned Booksmith again and had Lesley put him through to Mr Smith.

"Jupiter Jones here. You know my aunt, Mathilda Jones, and also Uncle Titus?"

"Yes, of course, I buy used books from you now and then. And besides that, I just saw her yesterday."

"In San Francisco, I know. Well, Aunt Mathilda told me about the reunion. Do many the former students actually go there?"

"Many, but not all of them, of course. But here in Rocky Beach, where a lot of us still live, there must have been almost 20 people or so."

Jupiter wondered. The firebug wasn't at the alumni meeting. He was here in Rocky Beach. "And was anyone missing, Mr Smith? Were you missing a former schoolmate?"

"Listen, why don't you ask your aunt about this? I have other things to do—which was why I came back earlier. You may not know that but my shop was almost burned down. This place is a mess."

"Yes, Mr Smith, we know about the fire," Jupiter said. "My questions are directly related to that."

"Why?"

"I'll explain later. Please, Mr Smith, which of your former schoolmates were not in San Francisco?"

Mr Smith was thinking. "All right, many were not there. We meet every five years and we've lost track of a few, Frances Stone for instance. Pity, I'd have liked to meet her again sometime. Sally Woods was missing, then Larry, also known as the Digger, who always buried himself in housework. Or Roderick, the snail, who was always the slowest of them all. Are you looking for anyone in particular?"

Jupiter thought of the offender profile he had created himself. "A man. He must have been a loner, quite intelligent, conspicuous by his high voice and red hair."

"Red hair? Hmm... perhaps not."

"Why not?"

"I thought you were talking about Dave Rawlings, the one with a falsetto voice. Somehow his voice just wouldn't break and he spoke so high... but he had dark hair."

"Tell me more about Dave anyway," asked Jupiter excitedly. He felt it all over his body that he was on the right track. The trail was getting hotter and hotter.

"Dave never showed up at any of our meetings. I am not surprised, because he hardly had any contact with us because he simply annoyed everyone. He was just a real pigheaded guy, arrogant at the same time, and thought that we were all a bunch of losers. When he wasn't talking about the Middle Ages, he would put up some daring theories about the stages of wisdom or something like that. No, he really wasn't a bad student. Only when he didn't feel like it. Later, he had an accident. You know, he was always experimenting with chemicals. Then I never heard from him again. I've no idea where he lives now."

"But you remember him very well, Mr Smith," Jupiter probed.

"Indeed, because I couldn't stand him," Mr Smith said. "He kept nagging about how I was better off than him, even though he was much smarter. Oh, well, why am I telling you all this?"

Jupiter thanked the bookseller for the precise information. "One more thing, Mr Smith... how is your business?"

“My business? Not bad!” replied the bookseller. His astonishment at this question was to be heard. “I have many customers interested in my large selection of old books.”

“Thank you, Mr Smith. And please give my regards to Lesley.” With a sigh, Jupiter hung up.

“Pete, I guess we got our man—Dave Rawlings. Now all we have to do is get to him.”

“But our suspect has red curls,” Pete, who had overheard everything over the loudspeaker.

Jupiter laughed. “Disguise, Pete. Hair can be dyed and curls are no problem. And have you ever heard of wigs?”

Pete played surprised. “Nah, I didn’t know that.” Then he got serious again. “Say, should we notify the police?”

“We have suspicions, but no evidence yet. And you and I are the only ones who’ve seen this man up close, at least for a little while.”

“Except Mrs Ferguson.”

Jupiter nodded. “That’s right. I hope this doesn’t put her in danger. After all, this maniac has already attempted to run her down with his car. By the way, I remembered Aunt Mathilda mentioned the name Dave the other day.”

“Yeah?” Pete looked at him in amazement. “In what connection?”

“She talked about old times. Dave was one of her admirers. Interesting, isn’t it?”

“Really?” Pete remarked.

“She also showed me some old photos,” Jupiter continued, “but she did not point out Dave Rawlings to me—not that it was important then.”

15. The Last Message

They carefully locked up Headquarters and went back to the Jones family home. Meanwhile, it was already night-time—the firebug’s time.

“We were gone quite a long time,” Pete said. “I wonder if he’s called yet.”

“So far, it’s always a little later.” Jupiter said as he sat down at the kitchen table.

They waited. Jupiter followed the second hand of the kitchen clock. Pete got up and looked out the window. Restlessly, he walked up and down and finally stopped in front of the window again.

“Sit down, you’re making me nervous,” said Jupiter. “We can’t go on like this.”

At Jupe’s request, Pete had turned off the radio so they could listen to the sounds from outside, but everything was quiet—almost dead quiet.

“The police are watching the salvage yard,” Pete tried to calm himself.

But Jupiter had other thoughts. “I’m afraid Dave Rawlings is smart enough not to fall into the police trap.”

“I hope Bob wasn’t stupid enough to set Rawlings up,” Pete said.

Then the phone rang. Jupiter jumped up and rushed to the phone. But it wasn’t the firebug, but Aunt Mathilda.

“We’re sitting in a bar by the harbour and it’s fantastic!” she said. “Are you all right, Jupe? San Francisco’s great. Of course, we also took the cable cars, which you always liked so much as a little boy. Listen, there’s one thing I forgot... Do you have enough food? There are some sausages in the pantry. Remember...”

“Aunt,” Jupiter interrupted her, “I know, you wrote everything down.”

“All right then, Jupe. Are Bob and Pete with you too? And did that dopey Detective Franks finally catch the firebug?”

“The detective is not dopey...”

“Jupe!” exclaimed Mathilda, astonished. “Since when are you defending him? Just a few days ago you were berating him for his incompetency. I don’t want to repeat the words you said about him. To my ears, they were terrible things. For example...”

“Stop, Aunt Mathilda!” Jupiter cried in horror. “Detective Franks is listening!”

“What? The detective?”

“Yes, they’re tapping the phone in case the firebug calls back. I gave them permission.”

“Sorry, Jupe.”

“Never mind.” Jupiter almost had to laugh at their conversation. “But one more thing. The other day you mentioned a former schoolmate named Dave. Is he there in San Francisco?”

“Dave? You remember his name? No, Jupe, I have not seen him for a long time. I don’t know where he is, but I’m quite happy not to see him again. Once he almost set fire to the whole school building when a chemical experiment got out of hand. We were just recalling the incident with other former schoolmates earlier. Looking back, of course, everything was incredibly funny. But back then, I can still see the horrified faces of some of our schoolmates.”

“Thank you, Aunt. And don’t worry, we eat plenty.”

“Do you think we should come back? If the firebug is still hanging around...”

“The police are here and so is Pete.”

“That doesn’t sound reassuring, Jupe. You’re not hiding anything from me, are you?”

“Of course not!”

Mathilda had smelled a rat. “Jupe, I think we’d better come home now. The main programme is over anyway. And, excuse me, if you’re listening, Detective, I don’t want to rely solely on the police.”

Jupiter hung up. “Perhaps the detective will be even madder at me now,” he said, though not very worried.

Pete shook his head. “He’ll have to live with that. After all, he suspected us falsely.”

Jupiter nodded. “I am curious to see when Franks will call. He should have heard me asking about Dave Rawlings.” He was about to sit down when the phone rang again.

“Who’s gonna be this time?” muttered Jupiter.

He picked up the phone. “Jupiter Jones.” There was a rustle. Jupiter gave Pete a sign.

“You talk on the phone a lot, Jupiter Jones,” said the voice. “But you can’t escape me. Listen carefully. Today is the last sign of fire, it has happened twice... All luck explodes! ... And on this third time, the petrol station will go.”

“Petrol station? You want to burn down a petrol station? But which one? ... Mister, where do you want the fire department to go?”

“You know very well, Jupiter. You’re a clever boy. And if not...” he giggled, “then the fire department must search. They have 90 minutes left. I don’t want people to get hurt.”

“Thanks for the warning, mister. Please, don’t hang up yet. I have another important message!”

“What is this? It seems to me you’re playing for time. You want the phone traced? Did you inform the police?”

“Not at all, sir. I want to warn you!” And Jupiter said the following words very slowly and loudly: “Mister... Dave... Rawlings! Do not detonate the bomb and I won’t tell the police.”

He had given the name. It was a match. On the other end of the line, there was silence. Then the voice hissed: “You’ll pay for this.” It clicked. The man had hung up.

Jupiter listened into the receiver for a moment, then he hung up as well.

“Why did you call him by his name?” Pete asked. “That’s life-threatening! Now he knows we know his identity and we’re on to him!”

The First Investigator breathed out strongly at first. “It was intuition,” he finally said. “But now that I think about it, it was for three reasons. First, from the way he reacted, I’m now certain that I was right in my suspicions. Now maybe Rawlings is giving up. Second, I wanted to prolong the conversation so that Franks could trace it. And third...”

Pete looked at him, then it became clear to him too. “Third, you set a trap for him. He’s gonna show up here eventually and get even. Yeah, especially since you let him think that you hadn’t reported his name to the police yet.”

“Right, and then...” The phone rang again. “That’ll be the detective. He’s probably bursting with curiosity.” Jupiter picked up. “Jupiter Jones.”

“Franks here. Listen to me, boy! What was that name you just mentioned? What’s with the tricks?”

Jupiter told him of his suspicions.

The detective was outraged. “You should have said that earlier, Jupiter! That’s concealing information!”

“But Detective Franks. We didn’t have any proof of that earlier. And you gotta admit it, you won’t believe half of it anyway.”

Franks snorted.

“Did you trace the call?” Jupiter tried to distract the detective.

“Probably not, the conversation was still too brief. Anyway, we’re pulling all forces to the petrol station now. I’m leaving a car in front of your gate for your protection, because you put yourself in danger by saying his name. I hope you realize that. And don’t even think about going to the petrol station. I don’t want to see you there!”

“Don’t worry, Detective, I’ll take care of our salvage yard.”

“All the better. We’ll talk later! And I’ll talk to your charming aunt. So much for calling me a ‘dopey detective’.”

“I’ll tell her,” Jupiter said diplomatically and hung up.

“That’s done. Let’s go, Pete. We have to take precautions so Rawlings doesn’t surprise us!”

16. The Fuse is Lit

“There is another reason why we can’t go to the petrol station,” explained Jupiter. He stood at the kitchen window and pulled the curtain shut with a jerk. “We have to wait for Bob. On the phone, he said we are to stay here no matter what happens.”

“He might come back here,” Pete mused. “I’m beginning to find this all very mysterious. But it’s no use. We still do not know where Bob is, so we have to wait for him here.”

“I just hope he really went after Rawlings. Then we’ll all meet here together... because we could sure use his help.” He looked at Pete. “Now let’s proceed with our plan! I’ll go get the mannequins quickly because Rawlings could be here soon.”

Pete agreed. “Good. In the meantime, I’ll take care of some clothes. You don’t mind if I rummage around in your closet, Jupe?”

“There’s enough hanging over my desk chair. You only need to help yourself,” said Jupe as he was leaving.

Five minutes later, the First Investigator reappeared and dragged the two mannequin dolls with him. Uncle Titus had once bought them for little money from a fashion store, but never got around to selling them again.

Jupe put the dolls on the kitchen floor. Together with Pete, who in the meantime had brought back various items of clothing, he slipped jeans and shirt over them. It was difficult to get the dolls to sit between the chair and the kitchen table, but finally they got it done. They took a step back and looked proudly at their work.

“Not bad at all, but this one figure should be much bigger,” Pete suggested.

“Which one?”

“The one that represents you, of course!”

As expected Jupiter played the indignant. “Nonsense, Pete, I’m slim like a Barbie doll! I’ve lost a lot of weight!”

“But all those candy bars you’ve been eating for the past few days are already leaving their marks.” He pulled on Jupiter’s bulging shirt and then lifted the doll’s T-shirt for comparison. “See for yourself. The T-shirt is rubbing against the doll like a scarecrow.” He threw Jupiter a few towels and together they stuffed the clothes.

“That’s better,” Pete commented and looked around. “A little noise wouldn’t hurt. It could make Rawlings feel safer.”

He turned on the radio up to a high volume. “Gosh! You can’t even hear the music out in the street.”

Jupiter covered his ears. “What do you say?” he shouted.

“Forget it,” yelled Pete. “Come on, let’s get out of here!”

The two left the house. To inspect the situation, they approached the kitchen from outside. Jupiter pushed a box in front of the window and they climbed up. The curtains were translucent enough to see the outlines of two people sitting at the kitchen table. One of them was, as Pete noted with satisfaction, considerably fatter than the other. The bass of the radio music also sounded muffled outside.

“Come, Pete.” Jupiter jumped off the box and pulled his friend towards the trailer. “If Rawlings shows up now, he’ll think we’re sitting in the kitchen listening to music. Whatever

he's up to, he won't expect us to surprise him from behind."

"Alright then," Pete said lightly. "We'll surprise him."

"Right. Or something like that. In any case, we should have a rope to tie him up with. And a strong light to blind him, because I wouldn't want to take a chance on a clean fight. The man is extremely athletic and skilled."

"But this time, I won't let myself be shaken off so easily," Pete said confidently.

They quickly did what they had agreed upon, then they retreated to the trailer. Since it would have been too conspicuous, they did not turn on the lights. Pete positioned himself at one of the small windows, while Jupiter turned the 'See-All' periscope to check over the wooden fence to the street. He spotted a dark Chrysler parked on the opposite side of the street. Two men sat in it and smoked.

"Hopefully the police patrol won't scare off Rawlings," Jupiter muttered and continued to scan the street. "On the other hand, I'm glad we can get help quickly in case of emergency."

"What did you say?" Pete asked without looking away from the window.

"That police patrol there. I hope they would not attract attention unnecessarily," Jupiter replied and turned to the periscope again. "My goodness! Hold on tight! Here comes Mrs Ferguson, marching right along."

Pete turned around. "Mrs Ferguson? What does that old lady want now?"

"Maybe she saw something and couldn't reach us by phone," replied Jupiter. "After all, we have been sitting here for a while. I had asked her to keep an eye out for Bob... or maybe she just needs some fresh air." He kept watching her. "She's got her crazy coat on again, and under her arm she's carrying a little parcel. Now she's walking towards the house. She really wants to come to look for us!"

Curiously Pete had stepped next to Jupiter. "What would the cops do?"

Jupiter turned the periscope. "I can't let her go near the house now! If the two policemen come out to check on her, that could jeopardize the whole operation. Take over, Pete. I'll go out and divert her from the house."

Jupiter left his post and ran outside. The yard was dark and silent. Only from the house, the music echoed incessantly across the square. With a few steps, the First Investigator went out the main gate.

"Mrs Ferguson!" Jupiter called out and waved to the old lady. "Please come over here!"

The old lady turned around, looked surprised and then staggered towards Jupiter.

"Mrs Ferguson, it's quite dangerous for you to be walking around here at this time!" Jupiter said and led her into the salvage yard. "Please come in quickly because there may be an arsonist around out here!"

"Arsonist?" Mrs Ferguson asked.

"Yes," said Jupiter. "The red-headed man who nearly ran you down. He's started two fires in Rocky Beach so far and we're on his trail."

"You don't say! That's terrible!" Then the woman pointed to the Jones family home. "Aren't we going over to your house?"

"Too dangerous, Mrs Ferguson, I'm taking you to our trailer. Here, let me help you." Jupiter tried to take the parcel from her, but Mrs Ferguson refused. "I can carry it, young man."

As they entered Headquarters, Pete let go of the periscope and greeted Mrs Ferguson. "How do you do? Why are you here so late?"

"Oh, my boy, I have a present for Mrs Jones, since she was kind enough to help me. But she is not here, perhaps I can leave it with you." She pulled the parcel out from under her arm

and handed it to Jupiter.

“Careful, please, it’s fragile.”

“A gift? What is it then?” asked Jupiter curiously. “I would love to open it.”

Mrs Ferguson giggled. “You want to know everything, young man? Well, it’s perfume, a beautiful fragrance, a surprise beyond compare called ‘The Oriental Blast’. She’ll love it.” She looked around. “Why don’t you turn on the light?”

“We... we can think better in the dark,” stuttered Pete. “And excuse me, we’re very busy now.”

“Yes, you’re trying to get the man. Jupiter mentioned it.”

“Well, Mrs Ferguson, he could be dangerous,” Pete said.

“I understand,” said Mrs Ferguson. “But there’s a light on in the house. Is anyone there?”

“No, nobody,” replied Jupiter. “We just forgot to turn it off.”

“I understand. Well...” Mrs Ferguson smiled furtively, and stood around indecisively.

“Oh,” she suddenly said, “I think I’ll have to sit down for a minute.”

Without waiting for an answer, she settled down in one of the armchairs. “My blood circulation,” she moaned, “it’s not the best anymore.”

Jupiter remained polite. “Would you like to take off your coat?” He placed the parcel on his desk and walked towards her.

“No, no, I’m fine. Have you heard from Bob yet?”

“He called briefly,” said Jupiter.

“See, what did I tell you?” she remarked.

Pete cleared his throat. “Well, are you feeling better now?”

“I think so,” Mrs Ferguson said. “Won’t you bring the gift over to the house?”

Jupiter nodded. “I’ll do it later.”

“I’d rather not,” said Mrs Ferguson. “You know, you’re polite young people, but there are things you forget. I would prefer the parcel to be on Mrs Jones’s table. Jupiter, be a good boy and bring it over. You may be there when she opens it. And maybe—” Mrs Ferguson’s face was twisted into a smile, “—there’s a surprise in store for you too. Maybe you can open it together. So please, don’t leave it lying around here. Bring it inside...”

“Now?”

Mrs Ferguson was stubborn. “Oh, yes, please. So I’ll know that my gift is in the right place.”

Jupiter wondered why the old lady was behaving so strange? Why didn’t she bring the present tomorrow afternoon when Aunt Mathilda was back? Jupiter breathed out. “Mrs Ferguson,” he asked abruptly. “Wouldn’t you rather deliver your gift in person tomorrow?”

Mrs Ferguson straightened up and suddenly she seemed taller than usual. “I’m going away soon for a few days,” she said. “I’d be much obliged if you would bring my gift into the house.” She collapsed again a little.

Jupiter wrestled with himself. On the one hand, this task annoyed him; on the other hand, it was probably the only way to get rid of Mrs Ferguson. “If you insist, I’ll do it. But then, I’m afraid you’ll have to leave after this. It could be dangerous for you here.” He grabbed the parcel, nodded to the old lady and left the trailer.

As Jupiter walked across the yard, he thought of why Mrs Ferguson had to come now of all times. Why does she care so much that Jupiter put the gift on Aunt Mathilda’s table? He held up the parcel and weighed it in his hands. Then he smelled it curiously. It was perfume, alright—rose scent. He shook the gift and looked at it indecisively. He thought maybe he should just open it, but he should not be opening other people’s gifts, although there was supposedly something for him too.

His thoughts were interrupted by a knock at the yard gate. Outside stood the policeman, asking if everything was all right.

"Mrs Ferguson has just delivered a gift for my aunt," Jupiter said. "She'll be leaving soon." He hesitated briefly. "Any news about the petrol station?"

"So far, nothing has happened. And we don't have the culprit yet. Don't worry, we'll stay there. We'll call you when the danger's over."

"Yes, thank you." Jupiter said.

Jupiter then crept inconspicuously towards the house. When he reached the steps, the radio was still playing and the light was on in the kitchen. Jupe took a step back and thought to himself that it was absolutely pointless to their plan if something keeps coming up. If Rawlings saw Jupiter entering the house, he might discover that the music and kitchen lights was a setup. So Jupiter decided not to enter but just place the parcel on the steps. He'll deal with it later. He then quietly crept back to Headquarters.

"Okay. I'm back. Mrs Ferguson, I'll accompany you on the way out." At the door, he turned to Pete. "I'll be right back. There's far too much unrest here anyway. Our whole plan may be in jeopardy." Jupiter helped Mrs Ferguson down the steps. Pete said goodbye to the guest.

It was Pete's turn to look through 'See-All'. He turned the periscope all round the salvage yard. The policemen were still there in the car. He watched them for a while and then turned the periscope to the main gate and noticed a movement there. It was Jupiter talking to Mrs Ferguson. What was there more to talk about now? Pete was losing all sympathy for the old woman. He thought that she was somehow annoying.

Then he saw something wrong. Jupiter had suddenly taken a step back. And then Pete couldn't believe his eyes. Jupiter pounced on the old lady, jumped on her neck, tugged at her hair and even kicked her.

Has his friend gone completely nuts?

17. Exposed!

Pete immediately ran towards the gate. He had to step in right away, else Jupe's gonna hurt her badly. At that moment, Jupiter tried to turn the old woman's arm on her back. When Pete had come a few steps closer, he stopped in surprise. Surprisingly dexterous, the old lady shouldered Jupiter and threw him to the ground. He landed in a dull thud. Then Mrs Ferguson took off at such a pace that even Pete, the most athletic of The Three Investigators, would hardly have kept up. Her coat fluttered in the wind. She had already disappeared around the corner.

When Pete came back to Jupiter who was struggling to get up. "Ow, my shoulder!"

"What was that about, Jupe? You almost killed her. What's wrong with you?"

Moaning, Jupiter pulled himself up. "Hurry, Pete, we've got to follow him now! Because Mrs Ferguson isn't Mrs Ferguson at all!"

"How? I don't understand! Who else could she be?"

"Gee, Pete, is that so hard to understand?" He held his shoulder with a painfully contorted face. And the next words came out of him. "Mrs Ferguson is just a disguise. You saw how she suddenly ran away. There was nothing to be seen of a pitiful Granny! We are dealing with the firebug! Dave Rawlings!"

"What makes you think of that?" Pete couldn't believe it.

"When I was about to lead her out the gate, I happened to notice something scribbled at the bottom of her colourful coat," Jupe said. "There were several green question marks!"

"It was Bob!" Pete exclaimed. A question mark was the secret symbol of The Three Investigators. When one of them wanted to let the others know that he had been to a certain place, he'd chalked up a question mark. Jupiter used white chalk, Pete used blue, and Bob used green, so each of them always knew who had left the mark.

"I'm now sure that Dave Rawlings locked Bob up unless something even worse happened to him. Bob's in trouble!" Jupe exclaimed.

He looked over at the police car. The old woman had run off in the opposite direction, so it was likely that the two policemen wouldn't have seen her at all.

"Pete, go over and tell them that Franks is to go over to Mrs Ferguson's apartment with some people right away. I'll go there right now. Then you follow."

Although Jupiter ran for his life and tried to ignore the stabbing pain in his shoulder, Pete had caught up with him after a hundred metres.

Together they turned into the street where Mrs Ferguson's apartment stood. Panting, they reached the entrance. Pete threw himself against the front door, which immediately gave way. They rushed up the stairs. When they reached the third floor, Jupiter pointed to the broken door. He gasped for breath and pulled out the key Lesley had found in the book store.

"There! It fits," exclaimed Jupiter. "Rawlings, alias Ferguson, is the firebug!"

Carefully Pete pushed the door open. Everything in the apartment was quiet.

"Bob? Are you here?" Jupiter jumped into the apartment.

Bob's cries for help were muffled.

Almost immediately, Jupiter followed the muffled sounds and was at the storeroom. The door was locked and there was no key.

“Bob! We’re here!” cried Jupiter. “We’ll have you freed in a moment.”

“Thank goodness, Jupe!” Bob gasped. “I was afraid everything would go wrong! Just get me out of here!”

“Your lock picks, Pete,” Jupiter told Pete.

“Okay.” Pete took out his lock pick set. While he tampered with the lock, Jupiter looked over to the apartment door. No sign of Ferguson yet. Less than two minutes later, Bob stepped out of the storage room.

“Congratulations,” said a voice behind them.

The Three Investigators turned around. It was Dave Rawlings, still in his Mrs Ferguson disguise. He was holding a gun in his right hand. “Here you are, The Three Investigators! Don’t move from that spot. I have some things to pick up before I can leave for good.” Unmistakably, he pointed them towards the storeroom.

“What am I going to do with you? Lock you up and let you starve? You guys have really put a crimp in my plans. Actually, my plan is not foiled yet. All you have to do is stay here long enough and keep quiet.”

“You’re quite right, Mr Rawlings,” Jupiter said to buy time. “Our detective agency is not to be underestimated. Aren’t you interested to know why we’ve just uncovered you so suddenly?”

As Jupiter had hoped, Rawlings felt challenged.

“Well, then tell me, wise guy.”

“Bob scribbled a secret mark on your coat with a piece of chalk.” Jupiter pointed to the bottom of the colourful coat. “When I discovered it, I knew you had him locked up.”

“You sneaky rat!” Rawlings cast an evil eye towards Bob. “But you can tell me something else, Jupiter. How did you get my name?”

“Well,” the First Investigator said. “I looked for the common denominator for the arson attacks and found out that all the victims of the attacks went to the same school. Then I looked for a schoolmate who was not at the current alumni reunion, and that was you. You cut off contact with your former schoolmates a long time ago. You were a loner of a special kind. By the way, you already had an accident at school, which points to your actions today. You experimented with chemical substances.

“During your school days, you were interested in the Middle Ages, in which alchemy also played a role, hence your clues with the sign of fire. You meant a triangle. We solved the clues and were able to determine the location for the third planned attack. We were just unsure whether you were aiming for the salvage yard or the petrol station.”

Rawlings grinned insecurely and said nothing.

“Whatever,” continued Jupiter. “We also believed that you probably blamed other people for your accident back then. In general, you felt superior. You couldn’t stand rejection...” Here Jupiter hesitated for the first time. “Especially when they came from a woman you are fond of. That’s why...” Now Jupiter faltered completely, because Rawlings had come closer and closer during his explanations.

The expression on his face had darkened visibly. “You’re a clever little fellow, Jupiter Jones,” he hissed, “just as clever as your mother!”

“My mother? You know my mother?”

“Of course!” yelled Rawlings. “Of course I know Mathilda Jones! I was very fond of her! And you... you have all the luck in the world!”

Jupiter swallowed. “Oh, so that’s how it is!” He was breathing heavily. “This finally explains why I have become a chosen target of your sneaky activities. You thought I was Mathilda’s son!” He laughed bitterly. “I’m afraid you’re mistaken, mister. Mathilda Jones is

my aunt. I live with her and my uncle like a real family because my parents died in an accident many years ago.”

Rawlings was shocked by the news. “You... are not...”

“No,” said Jupiter again in a more composed manner. “And it was not your only fault, Mr Rawlings. Did you know about your school’s reunion in San Francisco?”

“No. I haven’t heard from my schoolmates in years. I was away for a long time and when I came back to this area, I saw that some of my schoolmates were really getting into it. Joe has a thriving boat rental business, Smith has a great book store, and Jimmy’s petrol station is doing well.”

“So you set out to destroy all the success that these people found, success that you never had. You couldn’t stand all that because you thought you were smarter than all the others!”

“You are right, Jupiter, I’m smarter. They only succeeded because of pure luck.”

“Aha!” Jupiter remarked. “That’s what you meant when you said ‘All luck explodes!’ You want to destroy all their success which you believed was down to their luck rather than intelligence.”

“You got that right again!” Rawlings smirked. “And I am also more intelligent than you. You’ll see that soon enough!”

“You’re really very smart, mister,” Bob came into the conversation. He felt that this way they could flatter Rawlings and at the same time give Jupiter more information. “Jupe, he fooled me. He made me read out a text but he secretly recorded me saying it. Then used that in the phone call to you.”

Jupiter nodded and Bob went on talking. “He played the red-head, of course. Together with a friend, he staged the accident so that we could concentrate all the more on this red-head in our investigations. At the same time, Dave Rawlings, disguised as Mrs Ferguson gained our trust and was able to spy around in peace. And then he convinced us to go after the red-head. It’s an outrage!”

Rawlings laughed. “Not bad, right? I was the genius who introduced that red-head to you.”

Pete spun the thread further: “You have therefore planned the action in the nursery down to the last detail,” he said. “You made us be more suspicious of this red head. In any case, we didn’t stand a chance against a stuntman like you in that situation.”

Dave Rawlings nodded. “You got it, kid. I’ve had a good look around the place before. My leap over the fence of the nursery was no accident. But I had something else in mind. I was going to turn the police against you—with the business cards and the petrol can. Did I actually succeed?”

“Unfortunately yes,” replied Jupiter.

Rawlings smiled. “I’m so sorry, friends.” He took another step back. “Enough chit-chat, boys!”

Without putting the gun down, Rawlings turned to the chest of drawers. He pulled open a drawer, looked into it and began to rummage around.

Then everything happened very quickly. “If not now, then when,” Pete muttered and flew across and kicked at Rawlings’s hand. A shot went off. The bullet went into the ceiling.

Suddenly, the door flew open and two policemen jumped into the room. One of them was Detective Franks, who knocked the gun out of the surprised Rawlings’s hand. More policemen entered and together they managed to overpower the stuntman.

“I won’t say anything,” he shouted as he desperately tried to free himself. But against so many men he had no chance.

Franks pulled out the handcuffs. "You may remain silent, Rawlings. We heard everything outside. Jupiter and his friends did an excellent job of picking up the pieces."

Jupiter was amazed at the praise from the mouth of the grumpy policeman. "Nevertheless, you could have intervened earlier," he remarked. "Things were starting to get dicey for us."

"Dicey? You like that, don't you?" replied Franks, who immediately slipped back into his old role.

"Now go home safely. The Jones couple has just arrived home, my patrol reported it."

He pushed Rawlings out. "I'll take the arsonist to the car," he shouted to Jupiter. "And I'll speak to you in a moment." Then the detective was gone.

Jupiter suddenly rushed out from the apartment. "The parcel," he suddenly shouted.

18. A Present for Aunt Mathilda

“You mean the present for Aunt Mathilda that Rawlings left with us?” Pete looked at him startled.

“I put it on the steps in front of the house entrance,” Jupiter swallowed. “I was going to bring it in later. Aunt Mathilda and Uncle Titus must have found it.”

Bob also turned pale. “I forgot all about that parcel,” he shouted. “Rawlings told me if you open it, it will explode! Jupe, it’s a bomb!”

“My uncle and aunt are in grave danger!” Jupiter looked around frantically. “A phone, we must warn them.” He spotted a policeman examining the dresser. “Please, sir, I need a phone. Quickly.”

Slowly the policeman stood up and pulled a mobile phone out of his pocket. “Here, my friend, but only if it doesn’t take too long. It’s my private phone.”

Jupiter took the device and typed in the number. “Engaged!” he shouted. “Come on, let’s run home.”

The Three Investigators rushed down the stairs and ran out of the apartment building.

Franks was just putting the arsonist in his police car. “I need you guys,” he shouted after them as he saw them run past. A moment later, they had already disappeared around the corner.

In the sprint, we went along the road until The Jones Salvage Yard came into view. With their last strength they bent through the gate and rushed towards the house. The gift had disappeared. Jupe pointed to a step. “This was where I put it,” he said, panting.

Jupiter was frantically unlocking the door. “Uncle Titus, Aunt Mathilda!”

When he finally opened the door and barged in, he saw Uncle Titus. Under his arm stuck one of the mannequins that Jupiter and Pete had decorated at the kitchen table.

“Oh, boys, I’m glad you’re all right! We came back early because Mathilda was worried about you. I told her that, but that’s just the way she is. And Jupe, the dolls were a funny idea. Nice joke, but just turn down the music a little.”

Jupiter had taken a breath and interrupted him curtly. “Where is Aunt Mathilda? Where is the gift?”

His uncle looked at him in astonishment. “The gift? Oh, the parcel with the rose paper. Yes, Jupe, she was very pleased about it. I think she’s opening it now. In all the confusion, you thought of getting her a present. It was for her, wasn’t it?”

“Please, the parcel is dangerous! Where is Aunt Mathilda?”

“Dangerous?” Titus’s gaze changed from astonishment to shock. “A moment ago, she was in the kitchen.”

They ran off and ripped open the kitchen door. But there was only the other mannequin, dressed in jeans and a T-shirt. Jupiter could not be stopped and swept into the living room. There he found his aunt. She was sitting on the sofa, radiant. In her lap was the devilish gift from Dave Rawlings.

Mathilda aimed her scissors directly at the rose paper. When the boys rushed in, it caught her by surprise so she looked up. “Hello, you three! How nice to see you all healthy. I was beginning to worry. And Jupe, your present on the stairs moved me very much.”

Jupiter raised his hands. "Stop! I have to tell you something!"

"You can tell me all about it later. I just want to see what's in it." She unfolded the scissors.

"Don't, Aunt Mathilda! The parcel is a bomb!"

Aunt Mathilda turned pale. "A bomb? What's this about? Is it one of your weird jokes like the dolls in the kitchen?" She looked at him reproachfully.

Jupiter walked slowly towards her and took the parcel from her. "I'm afraid this gift is not from me," he said, "but from Dave Rawlings, the firebug."

"Dave Rawlings?"

"Yes, you heard it right." In short words, Jupiter explained to his aunt what The Three Investigators had found out. Only now did Mathilda Jones realize the danger she was in. She became pale with fright.

"Next week, you will get a real present from me, I promise!" Jupe said. "But right now I have to remove the bomb."

Carefully he went outside and the others followed at a suitable distance. Jupiter was not distracted by Uncle Titus, who was looking in amazement. The First Investigator carried the parcel to the gate very thoughtfully. There he turned to Bob and Pete. "Can either of you call Franks," he asked.

"I'm already here!" Franks pushed the front gate open. "You're surprised, huh? I came up to check on you. You ran off so quickly."

"There was a reason for that," replied Jupiter. With dignity, he presented Franks with the parcel, from which the wrapping paper was already fluttering a bit.

Franks noticed the look and turned to the car. "Is it one of Rawlings's nasty surprises?"

Jupiter nodded. "A bomb, sir. It was meant for my aunt Mathilda. It will explode when the parcel is opened."

Jupiter looked past him. From the lowered rear window of the police car, Rawlings stared at him. His face was ashen. Jupiter's mouth curled up into a smile. It was the smile of the narrowly carried victory.

"Carefully put this on the ground immediately. We have specialists to handle this," said Franks. He lowered his voice. "Now I've got to get Rawlings to tell me what he left at the petrol station."

Jupiter shook his head. "It is unlikely that you will find anything at the petrol station, sir. It was just a diversion to fool the police and the fire department."

Franks looked at Jupiter in silence for a moment. Then he shook his hand in parting. "Tomorrow at the police station, you will explain the whole story to me. Now you'd better go and look after your aunt." He nodded to the others, turned around and walked to his car. "On Monday, Inspector Cotta will return from holiday," he shouted as he opened the car door.

"Send him our regards," Jupiter said.

As Franks drove away, Rawlings looked away.